

## Chapter 609

### Hefty Nuggets

Unsurprisingly, the commotion in the middle of the palace ballroom drew attention from across the room. After glancing at Gary standing over some nobleman he had dropped with a serving platter, Jason's attention moved to everyone else. He watched body language and looked for aura spikes, as much as he could without pushing out his senses more forcefully. Most of the obvious reads came from younger members of the nobility, as the more experienced and high-ranking ball attendees had well-trained self-control.

Seeing Rufus making a beeline for Gary, Jason instead moved to join Princess Liara and her daughter Zareen inside a privacy screen. He asked about several people he had picked out as potentially being involved from the way they watched the scene. Some they ruled out immediately as having prompted things from behind the scenes, as there was no political gain for them. Others they gave him quick introductions of, no more than name, house and known political factions.

Jason noticed that Gary and the man he hit were standing back, while Rufus and another man were talking.

"Why aren't the people involved the ones talking?"

"The etiquette, in matters of personal offence, is to have others stand for you in the discussion," Liara explained. "The idea is to maintain cool heads and allow diplomacy to rule passion."

"Does that work?"

"Not really. The real reason is to use such provocation as a political tool, as is being done here. The person standing for the 'aggrieved' pushes for a duel and stands for the person in that, too."

"We have something similar in my world," Jason said. "Or we used to, anyway. When we still had duels. There was a second who stood in if one of the participants didn't have the bottle to front up."

"Does that mean when they got scared and didn't show for the duel?" Zareen asked.

"It does," Jason said. "So, who is that standing for the guy Gary clocked?" Jason asked.

"I'm not sure," Liara said. "He's wearing the symbol for House de Varco."

"It's Lancet de Varco," Zareen said. "He's a tournament duellist; well known if you follow the mirage arenas, but they haven't been operating for months. He's also a

sometime adventurer. His guild uses him for public recognition, and in return, they help rank him up with controlled monster encounters, the way aristocratic families do with their scions. He's one of the rare arena fighters to not use cores."

"Do you know where he was when the Builder cities attacked?" Jason asked.

"Most of his guild fought the city attacking Livaros," Zareen said. "All their 'special' members were assigned to monster watch on Provo."

"That's not so bad," Jason said. "I did that too."

"Yes, but while you were taking on gold-rank monsters by yourself, he was securing the inside of a bordello."

"I was just one monster," Jason corrected. "I'm not a madman."

Zareen and her mother shared a glance.

One of the people standing by was a gold-ranker, Quint de Varco, in the same dark maroon house colours as Lancet. He was amongst the people Jason asked Liara and Zareen about. He stood out for having the same house colours as the man talking with Rufus, along with body language that Jason read as more anticipatory eagerness than the curiosity displayed by most of the onlookers.

"I think I'd better get in there," Jason said.

He didn't use his usual trick of aura manipulation to smoothly move past people as this was not a crowd it would work on. As such, it took him time and a little rudeness to move past the gathering onlookers. He arrived to find that the situation had been escalating.

Gary was still holding a serving tray with an almost cartoonish dent. The head responsible for that dent belonged to a sullen young nobleman, now back on his feet. Separating the two as they stood off against one another were Rufus and Lancet de Varco, whose dark maroon outfit had the symbols of his house and his guild stitched in gold. It was very flattering, matching the gold of the celestine's hair and eyes.

The adventurer facing Rufus was speaking.

"From the look of your friend, Mr Remore, I would be quite confident in presuming that no apology will be forthcoming."

"Let me guess," Rufus said. "You aren't willing to let this go unresolved."

"Your friend has humiliated mine. If no restitution is offered, then I am afraid it must be taken."

"A duel," Rufus said, blank-faced. "I assume you intend to stand for your friend."

"I am. Will you be standing for yours?"

"No," Jason said, stepping out from amongst the onlookers. "He won't."

Lancet turned to Jason.

"The storied Jason Asano."

"Yep. Don't know who you are, sorry."

"Then allow me to introduce myself. I am Lancet de Va—"

"I don't care," Jason said. "Someone put you on the end of a stick and poked you in the direction of my friend. I'm going to be honest, Lancet: I know there's been a lot of talk about me, and I'm only here so the fine upper crust of Rimaros can finally get a look at me. Get a sense of who I am. Which I suspect you're about to firsthand. I don't know if someone put you here to give me that chance or because they have some agenda, but it was the right move. When you go after me through my friends, you get to see exactly who I am."

Lancet laughed.

"You barged over here because you somehow thought this was about you?"

"I did."

"You're quite arrogant, aren't you?"

"It's kind of my thing. So, as much as I would like to watch you find out what happens when you challenge Rufus Remore, you're getting me."

"So be it," Lancet said. "We can make arrangements after the ball is finished."

"No need," Jason said. "It's a nice big room."

Lancet frowned in confusion.

"Big room?"

"For the duel," Jason said. "We'll knock it out quick and let these fine people go back to their celebration."

"Are you talking about fighting right here? We'll duel in a mirage chamber, you savage."

It was Jason's turn to laugh.

"Oh, no. You asked for a duel, not a dance. I hate to break it to you, bloke, but whoever put you up to this made you the pointy end of the stick. That's the end that gets blood on it. A duel is about putting yourself on the line for your principles."

"Putting your reputation on the line."

"And you think pretending to fight is where your reputation will come from?"

"I am an experienced arena duellist, you thug. I can assure you that it is very far from pretend and there is plenty of reputation to be had."

Jason grinned as he saw the gold ranker from House de Varco wince. While there was no doubt that many knew Lancet's background, that was very different to making a point of it himself.

"An 'experienced arena duellist' wound up here, challenging someone to a duel in a mirage arena?" Jason pointed out, voice filled with scepticism. "It's almost like someone planned it."

Lancet blanched as he realised he'd broken the cardinal rule of the political setup by making the setup transparent. Everyone would continue to play along, but it was a minor humiliation for House de Varco. Jason wasn't going to leave the knife just sitting there and gave it a twist.

"Mirage chambers are for training. Arena duelling is a sport. I'm sure it requires a great deal of skill, but this social event is celebrating the people who put themselves on the line in the jungles and fortress towns. Who went into the depths to fight underwater monsters and stood their ground against Builder cultists and Purity loyalists. Reputation comes from what you do; not what you pretend to do in a magic playhouse. How do you fight for your principles when the fight isn't real? If you want a duel, you put blood on the line. If you don't have the courage of your convictions, you're just a coward playing pretend. So, what will it be, Lancet? Courage or cowardice?"

"Your words are just sounds of a beast, howling for blood because it's all his brutish mind understands."

"Cowardice it is."

"Refusing to participate in a backwards blood ritual does not make me a coward!"

"No," Rufus said, stepping up next to Jason. "Calling for a fight and then backing out when you actually have to risk something is what makes you a coward."

"You expect me to have a real fight with an affliction specialist?"

"What does his speciality matter?" Rufus asked. "I thought this was a matter of principle. Oh, are you worried that an affliction specialist can't face you without a team to support him? That's considerate, but unnecessary. He's an affliction skirmisher, not a traditional specialist. He'll hold his own against you, don't worry."

"I apologise," Jason said. "I mistook your concern for my wellbeing for cowardice. Now that it's settled, we can commence the duel. It looks like the dance floor has been cleared, is that space enough for you?"

Lancet's smug expression was now pure bile.

"Rimaros is the heart of civilisation, not some frontier town. We settle our affairs like gentlemen, not drunkards brawling in an alley."

“You’re the one who picked this fight,” Rufus said. “You can refuse to fight it and crawl off if you like, letting all these people know exactly what you are. That’s the benefit of being in the heart of civilisation. The people in that alley you talked about? They don’t get that choice. They win or die; they aren’t free to be cowards.”

“Stop calling me a coward!” Lancel snapped.

“Or what?” Jason asked. “You’ll challenge me to a duel in a nice, safe mirage chamber?”

Jason could sense Lancel’s feeling of being cornered as the young nobleman channelled his fear into anger. Jason knew that if he could sense it, so could many others in the room, which itself sealed Lancel’s fate. The entire encounter was about putting on a show, and they had seen what Lancel was. As the one who had lost control of his aura, letting his emotions spell out, Lancel knew it as well.

“I guess you were right,” Jason told him. “You do put reputation on the line. Your mistake was pretending to be something you’re not. If you aren’t willing to go all the way, you’ll always come up short against someone who is.”

“You’re just a brute,” Lancel shot back. “Everyone in here knows it.”

“I don’t deny it,” Jason said. “Which leaves you the choice between fighting the brute or running from him.”

“Refusing to spill blood in the middle of a royal ball isn’t running.”

“Fair enough. I’m sure we can fight a training hall somewhere. Probably best.”

“We don’t have to find a training hall, you lunatic. That’s what mirage chambers are for!”

“Mirage chambers are so you can do things without facing the consequences,” Rufus said. “Duels are all about consequences, which means that, by definition, you cannot hold a duel in one. All you can do is spar.”

“So, what’s it going to be?” Jason asked. “We have all these people watching.”

“Perhaps,” a new voice interjected, “everyone can take a step back.”

The crowd parted like the Red Sea to permit passage of the Storm King.

“Young master de Vasco,” the king said, “is here representing a powerful house and a powerful guild. I wonder if, in the spirit of celebration and reconciliation, Young Master de Vasco would be willing to withdraw his duel request. And that you, Mr Asano, Mr Remore and Mr Xandier, would be willing to accept that without blame or recrimination. No victors, no cowards and *no grudges*.”

“I would,” Lancel said, grabbing the lifeline.

The king looked to Jason and his companions.

“Will you accept the withdrawal of the challenge without prejudice?” he asked them.

“We would be willing to do so,” Jason said, giving a short bow. “As a favour to you, Your Majesty.”

They all felt the wave of whispers move through the onlookers; the favour of a monarch was no small thing, and the king would not be the one in debt. That would be Lancet and the forces standing behind him – whom the king had chosen to mention specifically.

“Then I will count it as a favour, Mr Asano. And as someone who has seen recordings of what you do to people, I'd appreciate your refraining from further attempts to do it in my ballroom. We pay our stewards well, but some things I would still feel bad about making them clean up.”

“I'll do my best, Your Majesty. But some days people won't let you end it with clean hands.”

The king let out a chuckle, like the parent of a naughty child.

“I think it's safe to say, Mr Asano, that after this display, anyone who comes to you looking for trouble will get exactly what they asked for.”

The Storm King turned to leave, but paused as his gaze fell on Travis.

“Travis Noble,” he said. “House Rimaros would like to again extend our thanks for designing the weapon that brought down the Builder's flying city and saved Rimaros, perhaps the entire Storm Kingdom.”

“Er, your welcome.”

“Our door will always be open to you, young man. House Rimaros remembers the debts it owes as well as the debts it is owed.”

Once the king walked back towards the royal family's seating platform, Lancet moved off in the direction of his house members.

“It just feels awkward standing here after that,” Jason said.

“We could go get food,” Gary suggested.

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Jason and his team received a wide berth after the incident. While he made a very distinct impression in Rimaros society, that wasn't the same as a good one. He was sat at a table with Liara and Zareen, sharing a large plate of food that Gary had left behind to go get a larger plate of food.

“That could have gone worse,” Jason said. “It could have gone better, but on balance, I'd say I was happy. I'll call it a solid win.”

“You would?” Liara asked. “Everyone thinks you're dangerously volatile, now.”

“Which matches with what they've been assuming, based on all the rumours floating around about me. I was never trying to ingratiate myself with the nobility. I was trying to cement myself as an unpredictable factor with the favour of the royal house. Between the king and people seeing us here, sharing snacks, that's coming along nicely. No one wants to interfere with me until they know more, but I've also demonstrated that I can be reined in. I've established myself as a factor best avoided, but that can be managed.”

“Did you plan for the king to step in?” Zareen asked.

“That wasn't part of any plan I was told about,” Liara said.

“I didn't plan it,” Jason said. “It was one of several scenarios I gamed out, however. Royal intervention, the people behind Lancet popping out. I was surprised they didn't send someone more capable. I saw he was an empty shirt and ran with it.”

“He's far from an empty shirt,” Zareen said. “Being a successful arena fighter in Rimaros means that his skills are real.”

“Yeah,” Jason said, “But his spine's imaginary. He never had to scramble for his life with nothing but his own skills and tenacity marking the line between life and death. He smelled so green it's like someone just mowed the lawn.”

Liara thought back to the time she watched Jason fighting against the trio of Purity loyalists. They had been sent after him with powers and items specifically to counter him. Even so, he struggled far longer than she would have expected before they finally pinned him down, and even then he never gave up, dragging her into it. It was as desperate a fight as she'd seen, but he treated it almost like any other day.

“I don't think they anticipated you asking for a blood duel during a royal ball when they chose him. What would you have done if he'd accepted the duel on your terms?”

“Drank the life out of him until someone made me stop.”

They turned to look at a man marching in their direction. He was wearing the same outfit as Lancet de Varco, but Jason could immediately spot that this was a different kind of man. He hadn't honed his abilities in the safety of a mirage chamber. He came right up to the table, planting his feet firmly as he stood in front of them. He started with a bow to Liara.

“Your highness.”

“Strictly speaking, the correct form of address is ‘milady,’” Liara told him.

“Apologies, milady,” he said, then turned to Jason. “My name is Hector de Varco, and I challenge you to a duel. Right here is fine.”

“Huh,” Jason said. “You realise the king just stopped me from doing this, right? Bloke, you might want some looser pants if you're going to haul around hefty nuggets like those.”