

## Chapter 551

### Sloppy Mistake

Liara was flooded with a strange sensation the moment she stepped fully inside Jason Asano's cloud house. There was a sense of oppression to it which only heightened as the open wall closed behind her, sealing her in. The aura pervading the place wasn't exactly stronger than Jason's own, but it felt somehow richer and deeper. It was as if she were extending her senses into a body of water, discovering mysterious depths and untold dangers she was previously oblivious to.

While the sensations the pervasive aura engendered were strange, they were also familiar and it took her a moment to realise why. Jason quietly watched her take it in, amusement teasing the corner of his lips. When she realised where she recognised the sensation from, her eyes went wide and he flashed a grin.

"There it is," he said.

Liara alternated watching Jason with looking around the room as if it were a giant beast that had swallowed her. Jason moved to a drinks cabinet, poured some amber liquid into a glass then brought it over to Liara, who downed it at a gulp.

"I should stock cheaper booze," Jason said, frowning at the empty glass she handed back. "How much did Soramir tell you about me?"

"Almost nothing," she said. "He believes that your secrets are yours."

"And his."

"He only did that because you represented a potentially unknown threat."

"Oh, I'm sure."

"Asano, I don't know what he saw in you, I genuinely don't. But I've never even heard of a diamond-ranker treating a silver like he does you."

"And how is that?"

"Like a peer. He thinks you're going to join him at diamond-rank, someday, and whatever he saw in your soul was enough to start showing you at least some of the respect that entails already."

She panned her eyes over the house around her yet again.

"I may finally be started to see why."

Jason threw the glass at the cabinet, where it was cushioned by the cloud-stuff from which the cabinet was made. The cloud-substance cleansed the glass using the crystal wash infused into it then returned the glass to its place.

"How is this possible?" Liara asked.

“The cabinet? It’s pretty basic cloud furniture stuff.”

“No, the... is it even really an aura that this place has? Is this cloud house a temple to you?”

“No,” Jason said with a chuckle. “It employs the same mechanisms, magically speaking, but I’m not in the club, as it were. It’s not holy ground; it just really, really belongs to me. It’s part of my territory. Outside of these walls, the Storm King rules. Inside them is my domain. Think of it as an embassy.”

“Oh, so you’re not claiming to be a god; you’re claiming to be a one-man sovereign nation.”

“I didn’t say anything about it being one man. What I did say is that it’s an embassy. The nation is somewhere else.”

She narrowed her eyes.

“You’re a king in your world?”

“It’s more complicated than that,” Jason said. “When I was saving my world, I accidentally created a country with a couple of territories. Not large ones, but there are smaller countries. Only two smaller countries, but they’re pretty notable ones. Lots of rich people, although in the smallest one they pretend they aren’t and try to distract people with hats.”

“Hats?”

“Yep. Lots of robe-wearing too, which you don’t see a lot of my world. Not the practical Jedi-style stuff like I wear, either. Well, Sith, let’s be honest.”

“Mr Asano,” Shade said emerging from Jason’s shadow. “Your proclivities are showing.”

“Shade, it’s fine.”

“You know that Miss Hurin doesn’t like you explaining things to people.”

“Hey, you brought the princess here.”

“Not for this, Mr Asano.”

Jason looked at his familiar thoughtfully, then gestured Liara to a chair.

“Alright,” he said as he took a seat for himself.

“Just before the explanations come to an end,” Liara said, “why would you let me in here? Even if it’s just a glimpse, it’s a big secret you’re letting me in on.”

“Soramir knows,” Jason said. “Trenchant Moore has some inkling, I’m pretty sure. If three people know a thing, it’s not a secret anymore.”

“That’s true enough,” Liara said. “There has to be more to it than that, though.”

“Yes,” Jason acknowledged. “Shade brought you here.”

“And that’s enough?”

“Yes,” Jason said as if it were obvious.

“He didn’t tell you why, though. Or that we were coming at all.”

“No.”

“I know he’s your familiar, but there’s a difference between trusting your familiar and blindly trusting their judgement.”

“Oh, I’m aware,” Jason said. “If it were Gordon bringing you here, it would probably be to watch old musicals, which is not a sufficient reason.”

“Musicals?”

“A crystal recording of people acting out stories, like a theatre show, with lots of singing.”

“Isn’t Gordon your familiar with the floating death orbs? I looked those up and the little I could find about them was both unconfirmed and terrifying. The only accurate information the Magic Society had was their iron and bronze-rank abilities, as detailed by Clive Standish based on your familiar.”

“Clive’s a good egg. It’s a damn shame the way he was treated, but this is why I’m wary of institutionalised power.”

“And this familiar would bring me here to watch stories acted out with singing?”

“It could be worse, believe me. When he and Taika get together... let’s just say that you should try and avoid learning who Michael Dudikoff is.”

“Who’s Michael Dudikoff?”

“A real estate agent.”

“Mr Asano...”

“Come on, Shade. She asked.”

“No one asks about Michael Dudikoff, Mr Asano.”

“He’s no Jan Michael Vincent, that’s for sure.”

“Mr Asano, I brought her here because she is facing some of the same issues you did in your world and I thought she could benefit from your experience.”

The half-smirk froze on Jason’s face as Shade continued.

“She finds herself confronted by a sprawling organisation whose agenda is incredibly destructive, but she lacks the effective means to pursue them, even after the terrible price they and their allies have made everyone pay. I imagined you might be able to relate.”

“Oh,” Jason said with a grimace. “That. Yeah.”

“What did you go through in your world?” Liara asked. “His Ancestral Majesty didn’t tell me any secrets he uncovered but he did talk around certain things. He said there were

things inside your soul that even he didn't recognise or understand. That whatever you faced in your world must have been extraordinary."

"The problem was that it only had two adventurers on it," Jason said. "There were essence users, but it's not the same. Their mindset was formed on the sensibilities of their world and they weren't equipped to handle the trouble brought from yours."

"You called it 'their world', not 'my world,'" Liara said.

"It's not my world."

"Aren't you a king there? Or whatever more complicated than a king is?"

"You've researched me. What do you think my general opinion of kings is?"

"So you walked away?"

"I didn't abandon it. It has people and leadership. Better than what I could have done myself."

"And you weren't tempted to stay?"

"That world isn't my home. I spent a long time learning that lesson. In any case, I had responsibilities that precluded me from acting how I would desire. It forced me to work with people I would much rather not. Many had become enemies, but there were larger needs."

He rubbed his chin, thoughtfully.

"Your problem," Jason said. "I do understand it. When you're fighting monsters, or hunting individuals, which I believe you did for a long time, then things are simpler. Even with an enemy like the Builder's forces, it may have been a skirmish war, for the most part, but they were still an enemy we could go out and fight. But this Purity group isn't looking to take the fight to us. Their raid on the island was the first time they came at us directly and even that was a decoy action while they went for their real objectives. They have powerful backers and what feels like bottomless resources. What they want doesn't require them to fight us; their agendas are hard to pin down yet have catastrophic outcomes should we fail to stop them."

"That's a fairly good summation of how I'm feeling about the current situation."

"I know how I felt when I faced these challenges in the past. You see what's happening and feel unequipped to handle it. The enemy is everywhere and nowhere, disappearing like smoke. The inability to pin them down and score decisive victories leaves you feeling helpless."

Jason turned, staring off into space for a moment.

"I have a simple philosophy for accomplishing my goals," he said. "You look at where you are, where you want to be, and then decide if you're willing to pay the price of walking

between those two points. Almost anything can be accomplished if you have the resolve, but you have to be able to see the path.”

“I don’t see it.”

Jason nodded.

“That’s where the helplessness comes from, and it’s like a poison. It crawls into your mind and whispers that no matter how powerful you become, it will never be enough. The enemies will always be too hidden, their backers too powerful. Your frustration becomes anger and you want to let that anger loose because it feels like it will make you strong.”

“Which it never does,” Liara said. “Anger tells you lies. That there are simple, clean solutions. It smothers your judgement and makes you weak.”

The pair shared a look of silent understanding.

“So, what do I do?” she asked. “How do I find the path I can’t see.”

“There is no answer but hurry up and wait,” Jason told her. “You’re being diligent and tapping every resource. We have to keep using every tool we have and hope the path becomes clear before we all pay the price.”

“Is that how you stopped the enemies in your world?”

“I didn’t stop the enemies in my world. We got the catastrophic outcomes I was talking about. The most I could do was stop the world from being annihilated entirely. As for the group, they collapsed after their work was done. Their people didn’t realise how grand a disaster they were bringing about until after the fact.”

“That doesn’t sound encouraging.”

“Encouragement you can get from your friends; it’s not why Shade brought you here. He brought you here so you could talk to someone who understands. I can tell you something about my experiences if you’d like. Maybe we can figure out what I did wrong and how to do it better this time.”

“I would appreciate that.”

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Jason took Liara through some edited highlights of his time on Earth. Mostly he described the Engineers of Ascension and their takedown of the grid, only touching briefly on the disasters that followed. Mostly it was about the timing leading up to that; the signs he missed and the mistakes he made.

“...like trying to wipe out an ant’s nest by stomping ants one at a time. You’ll never get them all, that way, and you’ll never destroy the nest, no matter how powerful you are. The more powerful you are, in fact, the more powerless you will feel without an appropriate

place to apply that power. Until you have somewhere to direct that energy, the sense of helplessness will only grow.”

“And what should I do about that?”

“For one thing, don’t let it leak into other things you do. The need to feel like you have power over something can lead to making bad choices. Killing when you should let someone live. Making threats instead of peace; hurting yourself by being domineering when being friendly would have gotten you everything you want without complication.”

He gave her a sad smile.

“I know that’s more what to avoid, but the unfortunate truth is that there isn’t a lot to actively do. All I can really tell you is to suck it up and stay focused, which is the real trick. Be conscious of your state of mind. I let things get away from me and paid the price for that. Something as simple as having someone who understands to talk about it with can help with that, so why don’t we start now? I’ve talked you through my experiences, so how about you tell me about yours?”

“This is all new to me,” Liara said. “The Builder response office has had the Purity issues added to its plate now the Builder affairs are mostly mop-up. It’s a very different fight, though. We knew what the Builder cult wanted and what they would need to do to get it. It was a fight. With Purity, we’re reaching under cupboards to grab at scurrying insects.”

“Mr Asano,” Shade said. “While I am loath to interrupt, Miss Sophie will be contacting you presently on an issue I believe warrants immediate attention. Further, you may wish to include Lady Liara.”

Liara was already familiar with Jason’s chat functions from the expedition to the Builder island, so there was no need to explain as Sophie’s voice chat arrived and Jason both joined and invited Liara to join.

“Why did you bring the princess in on this?” Sophie asked without greeting or preamble.

“We happened to be talking when you contacted me and it seemed like a good idea,” Jason said.

“Jason, I know you think the blue hair thing is sexy—”

“Hey...” Jason said, cutting her off.

“I’m just saying that you can’t just randomly bring people in on team business.”

“It was at my suggestion that Lady Liara was included, Miss Sophie.”

“Oh, that’s alright then,” Sophie said.

“Wait,” Jason said. “If I do it, it’s because I’m wrapped around some lady’s finger, if Shade suggests it, it’s a sensible choice?” Jason asked.

“Yes,” Sophie said bluntly.

“That’s a little hurtful.”

“Asano, it’s a matter of judgement.”

“I’ll have you know that—”

“Mr Asano,” Shade interrupted. “I will remind you that we have company, as well as that Miss Sophie has some news that should be addressed.”

“Alright,” Jason said reluctantly, “but I’m going to be coming back to this issue. I won’t be so easily distracted.”

“What’s for dinner tonight?” Sophie asked.

“Oh, that’s going to be great,” Jason said. “I’m cooking almost everything in palm leaves. I’ve got this—”

“Mr Asano?” Shade said pointedly.

“What? Oh, sorry, Shade. What did you call about, Wexler?”

“I just got jumped by a bunch of silver-rank thugs.”

“Purity worshippers?” Liara asked.

“Not exactly,” Sophie said. “These were local hires, from a city called Casallini.”

“In Giralano,” Liara said bitterly. “That whole country is a stain full of drug dealers and smugglers.”

“A wretched hive of scum and villainy?” Jason asked.

“Don’t answer that,” Sophie told her. “That’s his ‘I’m talking some nonsense you won’t understand for my own amusement’ voice.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Jason said, the picture of confused innocence.

“Perhaps we should stay on topic,” Liara suggested. “Miss Wexler, are you’re certain these men were from Casallini?”

“Oh, yeah,” Sophie said. “I put the hard question on the survivors once I was done.”

“How many were there?” Jason asked.

“Eight, but they were raw garbage. No training, no experience, reeking of cores. They were a local gang of toughs hired to come after me specifically.”

“They knew you were coming?”

“And what did you mean when you said they weren’t exactly Purity worshippers?” Liara added.

“Yeah, they knew I was coming. I questioned the survivors and they cracked pretty quick. These weren’t zealots, just a local gang. They were hired by some Purity loyalists.

They're waiting for these guys to bring me to them, so I say we get the team together, drop down on them like a pallet of marble bricks and scoop them up."

"No!" Jason and Liara exclaimed simultaneously, then looked at each other, slightly surprised.

"Why not?" Sophie asked.

"It's a trap," Jason said. "Those Purity worshippers are a worm on a hook."

"Exactly," Liara said. "The Order of Redeeming Light have been extremely diligent about keeping their operations informationally secure. If they made a sloppy mistake all of a sudden, giving us an unexpected opportunity, it's almost certainly a lure."

"I doubt they're even really Purity people," Jason said. "Probably another level of cut-out. The order will be sore about exposing themselves after losing people while raiding the island just a couple of days ago."

"I'll send civic forces from the Storm Kingdom to sweep them up, rather than the Adventure Society," Liara said. "It makes more sense diplomatically and won't tap the society's already too-thin resources. Plus, we have a large force in Casallini because it's a border city, so we can move faster and with people who know the area. In the meantime, Miss Wexler, I'm using my authority within the Adventure Society to order a stop on your contract. It's low-priority, so no one will be missing any desperately needed supplies."

"I can finish it," Sophie said.

"I'm not taking any unnecessary risks," Liara said. "They have a taste for grabbing adventurers and they clearly know your schedule. Get back to Rimaros. Your contract is cancelled."