

Chapter 522

A Normal Man

The office door of Havi Estos burst open to admit Havi's stumbling, flustered great-nephew. Havi looked up unhappily from the accounting papers he had been concentrating on.

"Jono, what have we said about knocking?"

"Sorry, boss, but—"

He was cut off as a strong arm grabbed him by the back of the shirt and yanked him back out of the office door to clear the way. A woman with bright pink hair stormed in and planted herself in front of Havi's desk.

"Estella," he said warmly. "I don't normally do personal meetings here."

"My other thought was burning this place to the ground, Estos, so you should be thankful I want the money."

"Then, thank you, I suppose."

"What did I tell you after last time? That if you send me to look into some crazy powerful monster, we're done. So you're going to pay me – triple, by the way – and then you're going to forget I exist and never call on me again."

Havi observed her from under raised eyebrows.

"I take it there was a problem with... what was the name?"

"Jason Asano," Jono's voice came feebly from outside the office.

"That was it," Havi said. "There was a problem with Mr Asano?"

"Yes, Havi. There was a big bloody problem with Jason Asano, starting with the fact that I just got done escaping the shadow monsters he sent looking for me the moment he sensed me. Shadow monsters, by the way, that were extremely difficult to spot and evade."

"All I asked you to do was take a peek at his aura and see what you find. Unless you were careless, he shouldn't have been able to sense someone with your strength. Tell me everything."

"If you want anything out of me, Havi, then you pay me first."

"That is not ordinarily how I do business, Miss Warnock, but—"

"Then I guess I'll go with burning the place down after all."

She turned and strode out.

"Estella..."

She didn't stop and left the office. Havi's figure blurred and vanished and he appeared in his office doorway, but she was already gone from the outer office. Jono was sitting in his chair, looking nervous.

"I thought this building was meant to have protections against people strolling in or out," Havi said.

"I thought you liked using her because she doesn't care about that kind of thing," Jono said. Havi turned a gaze on him and Jono wilted.

"Quite right, Jono."

Jono let out a breath as Havi returned to his office.

"What have I told you about breathing, Jono?" Havi's voice came from his office.

"Sorry boss."

"Find out everything about Jason Asano, Jono. Everything."

"Yes, boss."

"And send Warnock her money. Triple the usual rate."

"You look nervous, granddaughter. Is that why I haven't seen you in a little while?"

"I'm a little concerned about one of your neighbours, Grandpa."

Estella cast her gaze along the river to the house sitting beside where the river spilled over the clifftop. Warwick followed her gaze.

"I was wondering why you had your aura so retracted. You know Mr Asano, Stella?"

"Kind of. Can we just go inside, please?"

In the house, Warwick started brewing a pot of tea.

"What have you gone and gotten yourself into?" Warwick asked. "You know that Asano's name has been appearing a lot over the last few weeks, within certain rarefied circles?"

"Oh, I've heard."

"Perhaps you should tell me everything. I know Mr Asano a little. The man makes a delightful smoky meat sauce. I might be able to smooth things over."

"I don't think he knows who I am and I'd rather keep it that way," Estella said. "I wouldn't be here at all if you hadn't asked me to come. Is it something to do with what's happening in the city? The Adventure Society is mobilising on a level I've never seen. Word is that the city is preparing for war with the Builder cult who were around a few years ago."

"That's exactly what's happening, and exactly why I asked you here. But first, tell me everything about what has you so nervous."

“A few weeks ago, Havi Estos hired me to poke around Asano’s aura.”

Warwick burst out laughing.

“You kicked a steel plate there, girl.”

“Tell me about it. I picked a moment he was the least on guard. He was buying cheese. He noticed the moment my senses got anywhere near him. The way he felt, he’s like Amos Pensinata.”

“I’m quite curious as to what Amos will make of Mr Asano,” Warwick said. “I’m not alone in that regard.”

“I thought you’d tell me off for working for Estos.”

“There are certain inevitabilities within society that can go very messily. Estos is a man who makes such affairs go cleanly and there is always a place for such people. He’s careful about keeping his hands clean and too smart to let yours get dirty for him. If you are going to continue to avoid joining the Adventure Society, you could do worse. Just be careful.”

“That’s why I’m done with Estos. He kept sending me to take a look at the kind of people you don’t want looking back.”

Warwick nodded. He finished the delicate tea brewing process and poured them each a cup.

“What happened with Asano?” he asked.

“He sensed me and sent some kind of shadow creatures to try and track me down. Very hard to detect.”

“But they didn’t manage to track you?”

Estella shook her head.

“Asano didn’t get a clean look at me. It wasn’t long after that when I started hearing his name associated with other names. Like Rimaros. I don’t need that kind of trouble, so I’ve been staying quiet.”

“And that’s everything?”

“It is.”

“I don’t think that will be a problem. I’m sure Asano will be reasonable, and I can’t have my granddaughter too nervous to come visit me. You’ll probably be meeting him soon, anyway.”

“I don’t like the sound of that. This is about the Adventure Society mobilising?”

“Yes. Almost every adventurer in Rimaros will be involved. Pelli has asked me if you would help protect Arnote while that’s going on.”

“Grandpa, I’m a scout and a spy, not a warrior.”

“With the Adventure Society busy, they won’t be tracking manifestations and sending response teams as normal. Teams are being situated around the island to handle any monster manifestations, but Pelli will be the only gold-ranker here. What we need is your sensory range, which can cover a much greater distance than the silver-rank teams assigned to the island. You just need to watch for manifestations outside of the sensory ranges of the teams on the other side of the island. Pelli will cover this side.”

“And where does Asano come in?”

“He’ll also be here on Arnote. He can use portals and is going to help the teams with rapid response. Part of that will be staying mobile and, like you, expanding his senses to cover as much territory as he can.”

“If we’re both blasting our senses at full range, he’s probably going to recognise me.”

“That seems likely, yes.”

“And if he decides to make an issue of it?”

“Then talk to him. The royal family thinks everything needs to be a political game, but my read of Asano is that he’ll appreciate some straightforward honesty. You haven’t done anything to hurt him, so just deal with him straight. Tell him that you’re my granddaughter and I think he’ll be reasonable.”

“You think he will?”

“You can never truly predict another person, granddaughter. I thought you would become a celebrated adventurer, once.”

“And I thought I’d grow up with parents. People inevitably disappoint, Grandfather.”

“All of us?”

“You just asked me to blast my aura out in front of the exact person I’m trying to avoid.”

“I take your point,” he said with a wry smile. “You could say no.”

“You know that I won’t,” she said. “You only ever have to ask. Maybe you can help smooth things over with Asano beforehand, though. Seeing as you know him.”

“I would very much like that,” he said. “Unfortunately, I’m deploying in roughly the time it will take to finish my cup of tea.”

“It’s happening now?”

“I was rather hoping that you’d arrive earlier,” he admitted. “But I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

On the flat roof of the largest building in a small town, Estella Warnock was sitting on a folding chair, failing to concentrate on the book in her hands. She was trying to distract

herself since a monster manifestation would be impossible to miss unless someone came by to knock her unconscious. Which, she contemplated, was not out of the question.

With her senses pushed out to their full extent, every aura on almost half the island was within her sensory range, teasing at the edges of her perception. Only the low population allowed her to push her perception so far without suffering from sensory overload. She was also distracted by the anticipation of a certain aura entering her range. She put away the book, giving up on self-distraction.

It was not long after when she finally sensed the aura come into her range. She felt the reaction as it sensed her in turn, the source of the aura shifting direction to move towards her. She looked up at a dark bird-like shape gliding through the air and watched it disperse into a cloud of darkness that was drawn into the cloak of the man inside it, now floating down towards her. He wore combat robes in the dark red of dried blood and his cloak was lit up with pinpricks of light. He arrived in front of her, eerie blue and orange eyes staring out from a dark hood.

“I think you and I need to have a talk,” he said, his voice granite cold.

“Is this the time for that, Asano?”

“If a monster shows up we can postpone. Who are you?”

“Estella Warnock.”

He reached up and pushed the hood back from his head. He wasn't especially handsome by silver-rank standards but his dark hair was oddly shiny and his strange eyes compelling. His gaze moved to her hair; the same colour and her grandfather's.

“Warwick?” he asked.

“My grandfather.”

“Did he send you to spy on me?”

“No. That was Havi Estos.”

She could tell from his expression that it took him a moment to place the name.

“Someone pointed me in his direction a while back. He's some kind of criminal middleman, right?”

“Kind of criminal, kind of not. He used to pay me to look into people. Examine their auras to get a sense of them.”

“Used to?”

“I don't do that anymore. He kept pointing me at the kinds of people I didn't want to be pointed at.”

“If it makes you feel better, the royal family sent diamond-rankers to do the same thing. That kind of company speaks highly of you.”

“Diamond-rankers? As in, more than one?”

“I know, right? I should move to a small town or something. Wait, I did, and they came to my barbecue. Do I have to move to the moon? No, if some diamond-rankers found out there was some guy living on the moon, they'd definitely check it out. You're a local, right? How do you lay low in Rimaros?”

“I think that boat may have sailed for you,” she said warily. The encounter was not going the way she expected. “Are you going to come back at me for spying on you?”

“Lady, if I made an enemy of everyone that went rummaging through my soul, I'd have diamond-rankers, gods and great astral beings on my enemies list. Oh, wait. Look, the point is, I can't go after every silver-ranker that comes poking around when I've got Purity and the Builder sending assassins after me. It seems like you were just doing a job, and since you're Warwick's granddaughter I'm not going to make an issue of it. As long as you're done prodding me for goodies.”

“All I'm looking for is to have nothing else to do with you.”

“That's a little hurtful, but smart. I'd have nothing to do with me if I could get away with it. I'm not sure how reliable you are, though. You sold out your employer awfully fast.”

“Not employer. Client. Occasional and former client, who kept putting me in situations I didn't want to be in. And I know what trouble will come from him. You seem like a whole other kind of trouble.”

“Oh, I am. You should definitely have as little to do with me as possible. On an unrelated note, we should stay in immediate contact.”

“What?”

“You're here monitoring the island with your crazy perception range, right?”

“You should talk. At least I have a power for it. You're just weird.”

“I am not weird. I'm normal. I'm a normal man who eats normal sandwiches and occasionally saves the world.”

“What are you talking about... actually, I don't want to know.”

“My point is that we should stay in contact so you can warn me if something pops up so I can portal people as quickly as possible.”

“And how would we do that?”

Something appeared in front of Estella.

➤ [Jason Asano has invited you to join a party.](#)

“What is this?”

“Just a way to keep in touch.”

“I don't like it.”

“It's fine. It definitely won't hurt.”

“Yeah, because no man ever said that to me before.”

Jason snorted a laugh

“Fair enough. Look, it's just a telepathy thing for communication. You've never used one before on an adventuring expedition?”

“I'm not an adventurer.”

“You're not?”

“No.”

“Then why are you here helping out?”

“My grandfather asked me to.”

“Did he tell you that you might run into me here?”

“He didn't say might. He told me I would.”

“And you did it anyway?”

“My grandfather asked me to.”

He flashed an impish grin that definitely wasn't mischievously sexy.

“I like you, Estella Warnock. You should come to one of my barbecues.”

“This would be the barbecues where diamond-rankers show up?”

“Good point. You might want to...”

He trailed off and they both turned their heads to look west.

“Duty calls,” he said. “That's the response team I'm sensing downstairs, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I'll go open them up a portal. You should accept that party invite. The magic communication one, not the barbecue one. Although, that too.”

“Fine,” she conceded.

-
- You have joined a party.
 - Party leader is [Jason Asano].
 - Voice chat is available.
-

The team moved out of the portal and raced off in the direction of the manifestation without a word. Jason stayed next to the portal, a cloud chair manifesting under him as he sat.

“Shade, did I make an idiot of myself with that woman.”

"I thought it was fine, Mr Asano."

"I shouldn't have asked her out like that."

"You invited her to a social gathering, Mr Asano, not to a candlelit dinner."

"I just got done telling people I wasn't looking for someone."

"Are you?"

"No! I need to, you know. Work through my own stuff before I start dumping it on someone else."

"Then perhaps you should stop avoiding Mrs Remore."

"I am not avoiding Arabelle," Jason said. "What I should be avoiding is celestines. All these crazy gorgeous women are affecting my judgement."

"Yes, Mr Asano. That must be what's doing it."