

Chapter 596

What She Was Willing to Do

"Now that Dawn has scarpered," Jason said, "I'm half of a mind to do the same. Bottle up the pagoda, portal out and bunk off. No one would notice, right?"

Jason and his friends were sitting around a long table eating lunch.

"Of course, someone would notice," Rufus said. "There are twelve people observing the building right now."

"Seventeen," Jason and Estella corrected simultaneously before glancing at each other briefly.

"The point is," Rufus said, "that if you start making unexpected moves, people will start getting worried."

"He always makes unexpected moves," Farrah said. "And they do always get worried."

"I'm not that bad."

"Bro, you went through a children's ward and made everyone think you're an angel."

"That was one time."

"You had a car chase gunfight with a motorcycle gang hopped up on vampire blood," Taika said. "On TV. And I was driving. I'm not good at dodging bullets, bro. I'm too big."

"We do have some responsibilities here before we can leave," Humphrey pointed out. "I don't feel bad about skipping this meeting with Estella's former employer, but we've agreed to help Miss Leal obtain a new familiar."

As someone with a bonded familiar of his own, Humphrey was especially sympathetic to Autumn Leal's plight. Bonded familiars were actual magical creatures that could die, compared to Jason's summoned familiars. If Shade, Colin or Gordon were destroyed, their spirit's simply returned to the astral and Jason could resummon them. When Autumn lost her familiar, Humphrey could not help but think about losing Stash and how devastated he would be.

"I could go with skipping the celebration ball, though," Sophie said. "Why do the rest of us need to go?"

After months of monsters and extradimensional invasions, the dimensional membrane that normally kept such problems away had finally repaired itself. The Magic Society made public announcements and Rimaros, like the rest of the world, was in celebrations.

A lengthy festival was taking place, despite the devastation and loss the surge had brought. If only for a short time, people needed some release after monsters and death and mobile cities attacking by land, sea and air. The monster surge had been the longest and most devastating in recorded history, bringing with it not one but two interdimensional invasions, only one of which had been dealt with.

Rural populations needed to leave the cities and fortress towns, returning to what would often be monster-ravaged towns and villages around the Storm Kingdom. Infrastructure would need to be rebuilt and industries built back up. More than just the monster surge, the state of readiness the world had been in for a good five years prior to the surge had hurt economies, closed business and turned boom towns into ghost towns.

The repercussions would likely still be felt by the time of the next surge, but for one cathartic week, the repopulation, rebuilding and the messengers that had hidden themselves away could wait.

"The festivals on the streets are the real celebration," Rufus said. "This ball for the aristocracy is just a show. The first round in the next cycle of political gamesmanship. With everything being up in the air, a lot of power is up for grabs."

"So why should Jason put himself up for grabs with it?" Sophie asked. "Anyone with real power will either know Jason isn't genuinely leaving the team, or be able to easily find out. So why bother with the show?"

"It's not about convincing them that I'm going off somewhere," Jason said. "It's about giving them a sense of control. These are people used to holding power, and there's been a lot going on that they don't understand and have no influence over. A lot of that is centred on this pagoda and me sitting in it. Normally, their response to something like that is to take or, failing that, kill it. By jumping through some hoops for them now, I become more of a known quantity, and demonstrate that at least someone can bring me to heel."

"Except that's total crap and you go berserk when people try to control you," Sophie said.

"Yes, but we won't be telling people that. I told you: it's a show. I don't want to spend the next few years fending off people who think that I'm some kind of rogue threat."

"You are some kind of rogue threat," Sophie said.

"Again, *please* don't tell people that at the party."

"I hope you don't think one party is going to put a stop to people thinking that they can or should come after you," Neil said.

"Of course not," Jason said. "There will always be someone with too much ambition, too much stupidity or both. But most of the people at this ball are just concerned about a

loose power running around during times that are already uncertain. The Adventure Society and the royal family can parade me around, showing everyone what a good boy I am. Then I'm no longer an unknown threat to anyone's ambitions or just the general welfare of the Kingdom."

"You think any nobles care about the welfare of the populace?" Belinda asked. "Good luck finding one."

"There's no shortage of selfish nobles," Jason admitted. "But some, I assume, are good people."

"Nope," Sophie said. "They all suck."

"Based on your long history of robbing them?" Rufus asked pointedly.

"Yes," Sophie said.

"You realise that Humphrey and I are both from aristocratic families, right?" Neil asked.

"Yeah, but he's pretty and you're the healer. I've seen the things they hide away. Mostly while stealing them. Your aunt Clarice has a hideous doll collection, by the way, Neil. I have no idea why she locks it up, because no one is going to steal that, trust me."

"You broke into my house?"

"There's no point breaking into poor people's houses," Belinda said. "They don't have any money. I suppose if you're crap at breaking into places."

"The point is," Sophie said, "That I've seen the things they hide. The worse they are, the harder they work to make themselves seem good. Humphrey and his mum might be nice and clean, but even Humphrey will tell you that not all of his family are like them."

"We all have secrets we hide," Humphrey said. "Things we're ashamed of."

Everyone stopped eating and turned to look at Humphrey.

"What?" he asked.

"What do you have to be ashamed of?" Neil asked.

"My entire point was that we *don't* tell people those things," Humphrey said. "That's why they're secrets."

"You keep saying 'we,' but I don't think you have anything you're ashamed of," Belinda said.

"Of course he does," Jason said. "I bet it's that one time, as a boy, he secretly pilfered some condensed milk from the pantry."

"No," Gary said. "I bet he skipped out on training once to read a book on how to maintain a humble demeanour when people won't stop looking into your sensuous eyes, like molten bowls of dark chocolate."

“Sophie,” Belinda said. “What’s Humphrey’s deep dark secret?”

Sophie finished chewing on a mouthful of salad as everyone looked at her.

“He accidentally killed a baby,” she said casually. “This salad dressing is fantastic. Can I get some of this on a sandwich?”

As she shoved another forkful of salad into her mouth, Humphrey was looking more and more like a boiling kettle.

“I DID NOT ACCIDENTALLY KILL A BABY!”

“You did say that *not* admitting it was the entire point,” Jason observed.

“Yeah, he definitely killed that baby,” Neil said.

“I did not kill a baby!”

“It’s a helpless little baby, bro. I know it was supposedly an accident, but how could you?”

“Of course he had to say it was an accident,” Gary pointed out. “Plus, it’s his word against that of a dead baby, so that’s probably how he got away with it.”

Estella, watching the group continue roasting Humphrey, leaned towards Neil, who was also staying out of it.

“Is it always like this?”

“More-or-less.”

“Aren’t you all meant to be some group of elite adventurers?”

“I’d consider our capabilities adequate.”

“I was expecting more... I don’t know. Dignity, I guess.”

“Admittedly, it’s more like this with Jason around,” Clive told her. “He has a way of setting the tone. But it’s a good thing. Dignity is for outsiders; a face we put on, as needed. We let Humphrey take the lead with that. But we’ve seen some serious things. Lots of death, lives ruined. Adventurers often meet people on the worst days of their lives. Being able to have a little fun helps keep us sane.”

“Jason knows that better than most,” Farrah said, from where she was sat next to Clive. “He and I were trapped in another world for a few years, and we saw some serious business. Sometimes you need people who understand and accept you, and if you don’t have that, things can get extremely bleak.”

“He asked me to come work for him.”

“As an auxiliary, I know,” Clive said. “We try to avoid letting Jason make major decisions for the team without discussing them first. Unfortunately, they keep cropping up while we’re busy trying to not die. It’s a good life, but even if you’re not fighting for us, spying for us will be far from risk-free.”

Estella looked at the boisterous people loudly devouring their lunch. Being risk-averse had always been important to her. Too much risk was the very thing that had led to her falling out with her previous employer. As she watched the group, saw their care for one other, having fun together, she saw something she'd never had for herself.

Estella's parents had been adventurers, dying when she was young. She had been raised by her grandfather who never pushed her towards adventuring, not wanting to lose her the way he had his son. Estella had always been solitary by nature, but the loss of her grandfather had changed something. The absence of the one real connection she had to another person left her feeling untethered. Perhaps it was time to start re-evaluating what she wanted and what she was willing to do to get it.

"I don't like you going to him," Sophie said. "Smells like a trap."

"Everything smells like a trap to you," Neil said.

"That's because anything we run into out there is likely to be a trap."

Jason and his team, plus Rufus, Gary and Farrah, were tooling up for a fight. While they kept most of their gear in dimensional spaces, Jason had placed a ready room full of excess equipment they might need for any given mission. Their gear was stowed on the second-highest level of the pagoda, in what amounted to a locker room.

He had also installed more fireman's poles, but these were hidden behind a conspicuous bookcase that was opened by a hidden switch in an equally conspicuous bust on a small table. The poles ran from the ready room down a secret shaft to another hidden door in the atrium. Each pole was labelled with the name of a team member, except for one. Neil's pole was labelled 'Robin', instead of with his name.

"The possibility of a trap is why I picked the location," Jason said. "Which Estella won't be sharing with Estos until it's time for him to head there."

"You should have picked here," Sophie said.

"The only reason I agreed to this meeting is because of a name that Havi Estos dropped, and the person belonging to that name has a lot of eyes and ears. He's already in hiding, and if he hears that Estos is paying me a visit, he may disappear entirely. Again."

"And who is this mysterious person whose name you've been declining to tell us?" Sophie asked. She watched Jason as he glanced at Belinda, who shrugged.

"It's Killian Laurent," Jason said.

"Who is Killi... wait, isn't he the guy that put a star seed in you and then vanished?"

"With a good deal of the Silva crime family's money and resources, no less," Clive said. "There was some concern you might get a little, uh, *enthused*, once you found out."

“Why would you think that?” Sophie asked.

“Because you tore half of Old City apart when Jason went missing,” Belinda said.

“Well, now I can tear him apart, if we’ve found him.”

Jason’s kidnapping and star seed implantation was orchestrated by crime boss Cole Silva and local Magic Society Director Lucian Lamprey, in Greenstone. These were the enemies he had made by shielding Sophie from them, which did not sit well with her. After a lifetime of everyone trying to use her, the one person who helped change her life for no more reason than she needed it had paid the price for doing so. For all her frenzied searching, she had found nothing and failed to contribute to Jason’s rescue. Silva and Lamprey had both been caught and punished, but the man who did their dirty work had escaped.

As it turned out, Silva’s henchman, Killian Laurent, had been working behind the scenes on his own plan. For him, Jason had been a conveniently powerful distraction for Cole Silva, allowing Laurent to enact well-laid plans to plunder the Silva crime family and escape the city.

“Are you sure we can trust Estella?”

“She can only hide her emotions from my perception if I don’t push,” Jason said. “I pushed.”

“That’s not a guarantee,” Clive pointed out. “There’s a possibility that a false aura was magically overlaid on hers. Admittedly, anyone who can do that well enough to fool you, Jason, is probably more trouble than we can deal with anyway. Someone like that could probably come down on us like a hammer the moment we’re away from the safety of the pagoda.”

Jason moved to the bust and unhinged the head to reveal the switch that moved the bookcase, revealing the poles. Jason watched the bookcase move across with deep satisfaction.

“Jason.”

“Yes, Humphrey?”

“We’re portalling out of here.”

“We can portal from the atrium.”

“We can also portal from here.”

“This room is securely shielded against portals,” Jason said. “We need to leave so we can portal out. Tell him, Clive.”

“He’s lying,” Clive said flatly. “He can portal us out of here just fine.”

“Bloke, why would you do me like that?”

“Jason, my parents and eels?”

“Hey, there was a clearly posted sign telling you to not go in there. And why. You didn’t go in did you?”

“No, I didn’t go in! What kind of idiot calls *you* on a bluff?”

The rest of the group nodded their agreement.

“I can’t help wondering about how active you had to be in creating that scene, Jason,” Neil wondered aloud. “Did you sit down and write out how it was going to go? How detailed was it? How long did it take to craft the illusion of Clive’s parents and some eels, tweaking and correcting as you went?”

“I can speak for all of us in saying that we don’t want to hear the answer to that,” Humphrey said. “Jason, please just portal us out.”

“Actually,” Belinda said, “I’d like to hear—”

“I can speak for *all of us*,” Humphrey repeated, “in saying that we don’t want to hear it. Portal, Jason.”

Jason grinned as he went to open a portal, then stopped.

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- [Astral Gate] has detected portal tracking magic. Spirit domain prevents tracking within the domain, but external destinations remain subject to tracking effects.
 - Backlash from using [Astral Gate] to reconfigure portal to avoid tracking: low.
 - Would you like to reconfigure portal to avoid tracking?
-

“Huh,” he said.

“What is it?” Rufus asked.

“Someone is tracking portal use in the area. Not really a surprise.”

“All portal use on Livaros is tracked,” Farrah said. “The Magic Society does it, in conjunction with the Adventure Society. Part defence measure, part policing measure.”

“That involves a lot of infrastructure, though,” Clive pointed out. “Infrastructure that doesn’t exist here on Arnote. Setting up a tracking blanket without it is fairly high-end ritual magic.”

“It’s not news that it’s the top end of town that’s paying attention to us here,” Belinda said.

“We don’t want to be tracked where we’re going,” Humphrey said. “We should call it off.”

“It’s fine,” Jason said. “I can tweak the portal to avoid the tracking.”

“How?” Clive asked. “If it was that simple, why would anyone use tracking magic?”

“Not everyone has the thing I keep behind the eel-porn doors.”

Jason opened a portal, which looked normal but his blue and orange eyes started glowing brightly and he grunted as pain wracked his head. A small wall of cloud material rose from the ground and he leaned back into it heavily.

“Ow.”

“Are alright?” Farrah asked.

“Yeah. Just a minor backlash for overstepping my rank. Give me a minute.”

Jason’s companions looked on with worry, and while Jason had been optimistic, it was only a few minutes before the pain passed.

“Okay,” he said. “Let’s go.”