

Chapter 629

Just to Prove You Could

"Nope," Gary said as Belinda approached him in the yacht's dining and barge lounge. He was sprawled back in a chair reading a book with a mug on the table beside him, steam rising from the piping hot contents. His vantage allowed him to look out as the hover yacht proceeded down the river toward its next destination.

"You don't even know what I'm going to ask," Belinda complained.

"I'm not making you another set of lock picks."

"Alright," she conceded, "you apparently do know what I was going to ask."

"Well, don't bother," Gary said, not looking away from his book. "The answer is no."

"Why not?"

"Because I know who broke them and under what circumstances."

"I can explain that."

"You tried to steal Amos Pensinata's watch," Gary told her. "The only thing you need to explain was what was going through your head that made it seem like a good idea."

"I wanted the challenge."

"And you got the challenge," Sophie said, walking in. "Then you got the consequences."

"What's this about?" Humphrey asked, having come in with Sophie.

"Lindy tried to steal Lord Pensinata's watch," Gary said.

"It was a bit of fun," Belinda complained. "And his response was disproportional. I was going to give it back, not smash it."

"How did he even end up breaking your lock picks when you were trying to take a pocket watch?" Humphrey asked.

"Most high-end magical clothes have protections against it," Lindy said. "They aren't hard to negate, in most cases, but some clothes makers are different and know what they're doing."

"You learn to recognise the clothes of designers who cater primarily to adventurers." Sophie said. "And aristocrats who like wearing outfits from designers that cater to adventurers."

"If your target is wearing an Alejandro Albericci suit in Rimaros, or a Gilbert Bertinelli suit in Greenstone," Belinda said, "it's time to bring the tool kit."

"Shouldn't you just go for an easier mark?" Gary asked.

“Or no mark at all?” Humphrey suggested.

“Yes,” Sophie said. “Lindy, this new habit of yours is going to get you in trouble.”

“It already has,” Jason said as he arrived with the rest of the team, plus most of the yacht’s occupants. Travis, Taika, Rufus and Farrah, plus Estella and Vidal Ladiv were all present, although Amos was not. Korinne, Carlos and Arabelle had also joined from their respective vehicles. The dining lounge occupied most of the yacht’s largest deck with space enough to accommodate them all comfortably. There were enough plush seats and couches to go around, even without Jason reconfiguring the space to remove the dining and bar areas.

“What do you mean by saying it already has me in trouble?” Belinda asked Jason warily. “I don’t think you’re talking about having my lock picks smashed. Which he had to search me for, by the way.”

“I don’t control your actions off this boat,” Jason told her. “That’s for the team leader to do.”

“Stop stealing things!” Humphrey added.

“But while you live on this boat,” Jason continued, “there are rules. I don’t actively monitor you all to check if you’re breaking them, but Shade does.”

“No one told me about the rules,” Neil said.

“That’s because he’s making them up as he goes,” Sophie said.

“I prefer to describe it as actively learning about boundaries together,” Jason said. “But yes, I’m making them up as I go. And now we have our first rule: no one on this boat steals from anyone else on this boat.”

“It was more like a game,” Belinda argued.

“I have a lot of games, Lindy,” Jason said. “They were left to me by a friend of mine. None of them involve involuntary and unknowing participation. Admittedly, some have roll-and-move mechanics, which is arguably worse.”

“Try and stay on topic,” Farrah suggested.

“Sorry, yes,” Jason said. “So, Belinda, for violating the rules of the ship—”

“That I didn’t know existed,” Belinda cut in.

“Lindy, don’t steal is always a rule,” Clive said. “I don’t think you can plead ignorant on that one.”

“For violating the ship rules,” Jason continued, “Your cabin will be set to winter climate settings for a week.”

“What are winter climate settings?” Belinda asked.

“Full insulation,” Jason said. “Drawing in as much heat as it can from outside and letting none of it out.”

“Are you kidding?” Belinda asked. “We’re cruising down a tropical jungle river in summer.”

“You’re silver rank; you’ll be fine,” Sophie told her. “Have you already forgotten some of the places we lived? The places we hid out? Are you unwilling to put up with anything but luxury anymore?”

“Extremely unwilling!”

“Also, Belinda,” Jason added, “your shower will only work for four minutes a day.”

“Oh, come on.”

“And you can’t access the ship’s crystal wash supply.”

“Now you’re just being vindictive.”

“And the furniture will all replicate plain wood.”

Belinda’s section of couch turned into an unpadded, straight-backed wooden bench. Sophie next to her was still on soft cloud material.

“What next?” Belinda asked. “Are you going to cut me off from food and make me eat spirit coins for a week?”

“Not yet,” Jason said. “I’m reserving certain options for repeat offenders.”

“You, Jason Asano, are a tyrant,” Belinda said as if she wasn’t already planning to hoard food just in case.

“So Dominion keeps telling me,” Jason complained, shaking his head. “I hate that guy.”

Vidal, their Adventure Society liaison, narrowed his eyes and asked Jason a hesitant question.

“Do you talk with him enough that it comes up a lot?”

“No, but every time I see him or one of his priests they always smugly imply that he’s happy with my progress on the path to iron-fisted autocrat.”

“Because you are,” Belinda said.

“How about we shift the topic to our next destination,” Humphrey said. “Miss Warnock, what did you learn in the course of investigating the town?”

“That we should probably accelerate our progress and not bother with the towns and villages in this region.”

“Oh?” Humphrey said. “They don’t have a lot to offer us?”

“No,” Estella confirmed. “More importantly, we don’t have a lot to offer them. From what I learned, they are all in more or less the same state, which is too many people and

not enough resources. A lot of places that would normally see minimal damage during the monster surge were wiped out entirely. Between the length and the severity of the surge, many people returned to find entire towns that were levelled to the ground. They were forced to turn around and go back to the fortress towns they had just left, or to other towns that weren't as hard-hit. Add that to the refugees from Cartise who fled the city before its destruction and every place still standing is overflowing with people."

"They'll need protection from monsters, though, right?" Taika asked.

"One thing they aren't short of is adventurers," Rufus said. He, Gary and Farrah had accompanied Estella in her forward scouting. "Cartise had a lot of adventurers who are now protecting the fortress towns."

"I think we all saw the same was true, even at Cartise," Humphrey said. "The Adventure Society had supplied no shortage of adventurers, so while they were happy to use us, they weren't desperate for our services. I think they were more appreciative of Jason and Vidal's efforts, frankly."

While Jason was playing butcher and/or cook, Vidal had lent his administrative expertise to the logistical efforts of distributing food and resources through the region.

"Circumstances are similar throughout this region, based on everything I've heard," Estella said. "What these places need is more of what Jason and Mr Ladiv were doing; people who can help with resources and logistics, not combat specialists."

"We do have some of that, between us," Humphrey said. "Maybe not enough to be worth the trouble, though. We'd get in the way as much as help."

"Stella is right," Farrah said. "The things we can do, those people don't need. We should just hit the road and stay there until we find people who do need a boatload of adventurers."

"It would be nice to get far enough from Rimaros that I don't have to be so careful," Jason said. "Even with what little I've done here, it wouldn't take that much poking around to put the pieces together. The biggest advantage is that no one cares that much."

"The people here just want things to get sorted out with as little extra trouble as possible," Humphrey said.

"I do have one cunning plan, should I get caught out and need to convince someone I'm not me," Jason said.

"I may regret asking this," Neil said, "but—"

"Then don't ask," Humphrey told him. "Please don't ask."

"Okay, now I have to ask," Gary said.

"I hate this so much," Humphrey grumbled, leaning forward and looking at the floor as he shook his head.

"Jason," Neil said, "what exactly is this cunning plan of yours?"

"I can just tell people I'm my own evil twin."

"What?" Rufus asked, voicing a confusion that was reflected on the group's faces. Another Jason came in, this one with a moustache. He stood next to the original Jason, who took out a bushy fake moustache and affixed it to his top lip. Then both Jasons flung out their arms like they'd just finished a performance and were waiting for applause.

"I don't get it," Carlos said. "This is your shape-shifting familiar, is it not, Master Geller? Is your familiar meant to be evil?"

"He didn't mean literally an evil twin," Travis said. "It's a story trope from our world that probably should have been explained for context."

"Oh, he did a Jason," Clive said. "I'm with you now."

"What do you mean, 'a Jason,'" Jason asked.

"A Jason," Neil explained, "is where someone says some nonsense with no expectation that anyone will understand it because the people they're talking to lack the cultural context to be able to. It's oratorical masturbation."

"Masturbation is kind of my th—"

Jason put a handlover Stash's mouth to muffle it, then handed him a biscuit. Stash turned into a moustachioed African swallow and flew out a window that turned to mist briefly as he passed through.

"Look what you did," Jason scolded Neil. "Stash is a pure and precious boy, and you've tainted his mind with filth."

"Lady Pescos," Humphrey said quietly to Korinne, leaning closer to his fellow team leader. "Is your team, by any chance, accepting applications to join?"

"Is this how your team operates?" Korinne asked him.

"Yeah, pretty much," Neil said.

"I'd call it a standard team meeting," Clive agreed.

"How do you get anything done?" Korinne asked.

"Dashing heroics?" Jason suggested.

"How about we put aside Jason and any idea he's ever had for a moment," Humphrey said, "and return to our actual agenda of determining our next move. Miss Warnock, you've pointed out what we should avoid, but do you have any suggestion for what we should do?"

“Actually, yes,” Estella said. “I talked with a few Adventure Society officials and it seems that while their resources are understandably being deployed to the regions worst affected by the monster surge, it’s left a minor shortfall of adventurers in areas where the damage was less severe. These areas still need to deal with the monsters left from the surge, though, so the arrival of some temporary assistance would be very welcome.”

“You’re suggesting we skip over the areas in this region swiftly and head straight for lesser-affected ones?” Humphrey asked.

“It’s not out of our way,” Estella said. “It just means going past a few towns instead of stopping.”

“They aren’t great places to resupply anyway,” Rufus said. “These towns won’t have anything to spare unless we start bribing people, and then we’re just hurting those who would have gotten what we take.”

“Not only does this plan avoid the chaotic and overpopulated messes that all the local towns are reported to be,” Estella said, “but we’ll find locations where your team will be a welcome arrival.”

“I like it,” Jason said. “Let’s plot out some new destinations and I’ll give the to Shade.”

“Jason.”

“Yes, Humphrey?”

“Take off the fake moustache.”

“Belinda,” Humphrey said, catching her alone on the side deck outside her now-stifling cabin. He put up a privacy screen so no one would overhear. He joined her in leaning against the railing, looking out over the river. There was still plenty of other traffic, moving supplies between the hard-hit towns.

“Is this the part where you give me the serious talk about not stealing things?” Belinda asked wearily. “Instead of Jason turning it into a comedy show?”

“Yeah,” Humphrey said. “This is that part. He always gets to be the fun one.”

“I suppose you have a speech about how this is hurting me more than the team?”

“No, it’s definitely going to hurt the team more,” Humphrey said. “I get that you’re revelling in a freedom that you never thought you would have before becoming an adventurer. But when you and Sophie agreed to join us, that came with a caveat. Namely, that the consequences of your actions now fall on all of us, not just yourself.”

“I don’t think Sophie ever really wanted to be like me,” Belinda said. “She always stood out. I mean, she always looked like she does, but she was far from the only beautiful girl on those streets. It was her attitude that drove creeps like Cole Silva and Lucian

Lamprey to obsess over her. She's always had this... nobility to her, even under all the crime and the violence. They wanted to tame her, like a prize animal. Crush that defiance out of her, to prove they could."

Humphrey bowed his head, saying nothing.

"I think she was always meant for someone like you," Belinda continued. "I have a hard time thinking of anyone else good enough to deserve her. Which you don't, by the way. You're just the best we could find."

Humphrey turned to look at Belinda with narrowed eyes.

"Lindy, are you—"

"It doesn't matter what I am," she said, cutting him off. "Things are the way they are."

Humphrey let out a sigh and they stood together, watching the water go by for a long time.

"You've got more speech," Belinda said finally. "I know you do."

Humphrey nodded.

"You've been stealing things, just to prove you could," he said, Belinda flinching as her own words were used against her. "If you keep doing things like this, it's going to hurt our reputations and get us all demoted. I won't let that happen. But even if I managed to remove you from the team, that would irrevocably break it. We both know that Sophie will leave with you instead of staying with me, even if she disagrees with what you've been doing."

"It's not that bad."

"Not yet," Humphrey said softly. "But if you keep putting fissures in this team, they will widen until one day it breaks. Clive would go with Jason, to whatever his next descent into dimensional absurdity is. I would too. We might be able to rope in Rufus and Farrah. We'd need to find a new healer. Neil has had his team break apart on him before, and I suspect that if it happens a second time, he'll give up on adventuring. A good silver-rank healer will have plenty of opportunities, especially with the Church of the Healer backing him."

"Damn," Belinda said. "Stop talking about the team falling apart like it's a set deal."

"I'm not worried about the team falling apart. I'm worried about it breaking apart. I'm the team leader, Lindy. That means more than just failing to keep Jason on-topic in group discussions. It means that I have to look to the future; to the dangers that we can't fight off with swords and magic. Your behaviour threatens to become the most existential danger to our team. Maybe not now, but somewhere down the line."

"You're overstating it."

“Am I? What happens when you play the wrong game at the wrong time on the wrong person? The team gets blowback at a time when we need to be discreet, or what passes for it on this team. What happens when we let what you’re doing slide and the thrill isn’t there anymore? Are you going to escalate? Bigger jobs, more challenging targets? You could get all our society memberships revoked.”

“They are never going to pull yours or Jason’s memberships.”

Humphrey’s hand came down on the railing hard enough that it broke, turning into mist before reforming back into its original shape.

“Belinda, listen to yourself. You’re talking about the Adventure Society refusing to revoke a third of the team’s memberships. Is that what you want it to come to?”

“Hey, you brought all this up. And what about Jason? He’s been doing insane stuff since forever.”

“Jason and I had discussions like this when we first met and neither of us knew how flimsy our principles were before the winds of practical reality. But since we formed this team, Jason has always kept the team in mind. Yes, he might have some wild ideas, but he’s learned to pull back when we tell him he needs to. He trusts us for that, and that’s all I’m asking for here, Belinda. Trust us.”

“I don’t know what you expect me to say,” Belinda said. “Am I meant to break down and admit my mistakes in the face of your wisdom? That’s not how it works.”

“I know,” Humphrey said. “I just need you to think about things. About your team and what you want your place in it to be. Maybe talk to Arabelle. She knows how to listen without having any personal stake in our team.”

Belinda gave Humphrey a side glance before returning her eyes to the river.

“I’ll think about it,” she said.