

Chapter 516

What It Sent Us

Happy with his service to date, Soramir had Trenchant Moore assigned full-time to assist Liara and himself. While Trench could and would also assist Vesper, she remained a silver ranker and could not be given authority over a gold, even if she was a princess and he a royal guard. It was part of the complex hierarchical interplay between the royal family and their guard force of elite adventurers.

In the office he had been assigned, Moore was going over the reports of Asano's expedition. The expedition leader who made the report was unclear on how Asano turned the Builder's forces against themselves, while being very clear on the inadequacy of Asano's explanation.

"What does 'gots to get funky' mean?" he murmured to himself as he read.

It was yet another mystery surrounding the man. His connection to the diamond-ranker that even Soramir was deferential to was still unknown, as was his repeated returns from the grave, according to the church of Death. Soramir had told him it had something to do with a rival entity to the Builder and the unusual nature of the current monster surge. Their current best guess was that it was related to Asano's original world, which had been how someone of such low rank had been caught up in cosmic events.

Soramir had postulated that Asano had been caught up in events from the moment he arrived in their world the first time. Trenchant didn't envy Asano becoming entangled in the agenda of such powerful forces before he was even an iron ranker. Fighting through death over and over, facing down beings from beyond reality. And that was ignoring the relatively normal messes that surrounded him as an adventurer and an outworlder. He could see how someone wouldn't find a gold-ranker intimidating after all that, and even become quite unhinged.

It was clear that Asano had been profoundly affected by the forces pressuring him. Trenchant was still a little unnerved by Asano's cloud house. It reminded him of a still lake with a monster slumbering somewhere in the depths. He had no reason to feel that way yet he became more certain the more he thought about it.

Asano's aura was monstrous and Trenchant knew full well the kind of suffering it took to do that to a soul, as well as the time and struggle to recover from it. He was curious as to what his friend Amos would make of Asano, and he would find out soon enough. Trenchant had been directed, once Asano's team was registered for local activity, to deliver the team an invitation to a social event.

The idea of having a ball amidst a monster surge did not sit well with Trenchant but he understood the necessity. The wealthy and noble houses of Rimaros were an intricately threaded tapestry on which the Storm Kingdom rested. There could be no worse time for that tapestry to fray or develop holes.

There was also a more personal element to it that left Trenchant uncertain. Farrah Hurin was a fierce, passionate and courageous woman he had found immediately compelling, although there were many reasons not to pursue it. Her connection to Asano was certainly one and she had her own mysteries. She was also young, which would not matter at silver rank if she was forty or fifty, but she was twenty-seven. Twenty-six, discounting the year she had been dead, which would put her at less than a quarter of Trenchant's own age.

"You're aura is a little turbulent, Commander Moore."

Trenchant Moore's senses were sharp and his aura control was impeccable. It was not enough to prevent Soramir from seeing through him, however, or from entering his office unnoticed.

"I've been dwelling on Asano's cloud house," Trenchant said. He had been dealing with people stronger than him for decades and was an old hand at not revealing everything, even when his aura was being read. He knew well that saying true things was not the same as speaking the truth.

"Asano's cloud house is a curiosity," Soramir said. "If I hadn't seen its connection to him in his aura, I would have believed it belonged to someone else."

"Why?"

"Commander Moore, you have already encountered something similar, many times. The comparison has simply not occurred to you because it's a little outrageous."

"What do you mean?"

"How often do you think my senses encounter a location into which they are utterly unable to penetrate?"

"Very rarely. My understanding is that even the defences of the royal sky island are unable to block your perception."

"On the contrary, Commander, it is something my senses pass over every day, as do yours. Our city has many of them. Every major city does."

Trenchant frowned as his mind ticked over. What could shut out a perception as powerful as...

"Temples," he realised.

"Exactly," Soramir said. "The innermost thresholds of temples – their most sacred locations – are impervious to my senses. And I can tell that the rest could be as well, if the forces behind those temples wished it, but they do not obstruct their visitors. Only the most sacred locations are completely hidden away."

"You're saying Asano's cloud house is a temple?"

"The way it blocks senses is the same."

"You think his cloud house is empowered by this great astral being? The World-Phoenix?"

"It was my first thought, but I dismissed it immediately. I've seen the depths of Asano's soul reflected in his aura. While I don't understand or recognise everything I saw inside it, he could not hide anything from me. If there was a star seed of the World-Phoenix inside Asano, I would have seen it. In fact, he cannot be implanted with a star seed at all."

"Because he is a gestalt being, Trenchant surmised.

"You noticed."

"I have encountered a true messenger in the past, not just a summon. I know the feeling of an aura that feels almost physically substantial because the soul that projecting it is."

"Where did you encounter a true messenger?" Soramir asked.

"Heartsilver Mountain."

"Ah. You're a survivor of the Celestial Sword."

"Yes, sir."

Soramir paused to look over Trenchant with freshly assessing eyes.

"What are you doing, serving my family, Trenchant Moore?"

"My duty, sir. As my family has done since you founded this kingdom."

"Since the beginning? I'm sorry, Commander Moore, but I don't remember your ancestor."

"We were only a minor family in your service, Ancestral Majesty."

"But a loyal one, it would seem."

"We do our best. If this World-Phoenix is not responsible for the properties of Asano's cloud house, what is?"

"That is what troubles me," Soramir said. "I can't examine the cloud house, but I tell from Asano that it truly is bonded to him. Since he is not a vessel for the World-Phoenix's power, that means Asano himself is responsible."

"Unless it is a property of the house and not Asano."

"It is not. I contacted the woman who crafted it and she confirmed that the original item was an ordinary device, - if you can say that about any cloud flask. There is nothing you could feed it that would produce this effect except, perhaps, at diamond rank. She was certain that any effect on that level has to come from the person bonded to it and would require a deeper bond that was ordinary for the item."

"Then, either Asano or this great astral being has modified it, but the properties it exhibits somehow come from Asano."

"As I said, I have observed the depths of his aura thoroughly enough to examine his soul. He has magical bonds with some of his items, but also with some things not with him. I could not determine what, but I think that is where the secret lies."

"And what course of action will you be taking?" Trenchant asked.

Soramir didn't answer immediately, taking a piece of fruit from the dimensional pouch at his waist and biting into it. Trenchant waited for Soramir to unhurriedly chew and swallow.

"I've known from the beginning that Asano was unusual," Soramir eventually said. "The way he arrived in the Storm Kingdom made that clear enough. I was already investigating him when Liara and Vesper came looking for a diamond-ranker to examine his aura. I decided to take a closer look and test how strong his senses were. He sensed me much earlier than I anticipated."

"You did reveal yourself on purpose, then?"

"Yes. From everything I've managed to learn about Asano, he needs to be handled delicately. Too many mysteries and powerful forces orbit around him. The day will come when he is no longer outmatched by those forces and I don't want the Storm Kingdom to be on the list of his enemies due a reckoning when he hits gold and diamond."

"You think he will?"

"Oh, yes. There are two kinds of adventurers, Commander Moore. You are the first type: reliable, efficient and supremely capable. You advanced because of the way you conduct yourself. You are the kind of adventurer that everyone wants to work with. Asano is the other kind. Wild, erratic, improvisational. These are not the people you want to work with, but they are the ones who become legends. Usually by repeatedly surviving the kind of challenges that adventurers like you avoided in the first place."

"You think he'll reach diamond. If he lives long enough."

"Which is why I want to establish good relations now, but that's tricky with a man like him. He is highly averse to any kind of institutional power, so impressing him with our authority doesn't help. Nor can we be generous and accommodating because he wouldn't

trust it. Vesper is excellent because her hostility meets his expectations and I can stop her from going too far. Ironically, the pathway to the trust of a man like Jason Asano is to be self-serving, because it's what he expects. So long as we make the deal clear, he'll work with us."

"I've never cared for mind games of this kind," Trenchant said.

"Fortunately, that is not your role," Soramir told him. "You're our good example. A man of integrity outside of our political plots and schemes. Asano will respect that."

"Is this all really necessary just for some political problems with the Irios family?"

"That is important, but no. Asano's importance is unclear to me, but I don't think it lies with the Builder and what comes after. Not any more than tangentially, at least. The World-Phoenix wouldn't send us a silver-ranker to fight the Builder and what comes after."

"After?"

"The church of Knowledge has been building up fighting forces around the globe. Slowly but steadily, over the last fifteen years or so."

"The church of Knowledge? Why a military force?"

"The thing about the goddess of Knowledge," Soramir said, "is that she always knows something that you don't. The other churches weren't going to sit by while a bunch of librarians established a large military force. War and his subordinate gods have established response forces in those same regions, in anticipation of what Knowledge is up to."

"And what is she up to?"

"No one knows, for certain," Soramir said. "Not even the church of Knowledge's own people. But now we have a suspicion about the church of Purity and more grand summonings. Wouldn't it be a funny thing if all these messengers popped out to find the holy warriors of Knowledge, War, Soldier, Champion and Warrior all waiting for them, all over the world?"

"Wouldn't the Purity adherents move once they knew the churches were in the vicinity?"

"Some of the infrastructure in place that fuelled the one summoning we've seen was built into that dam at the time of its construction. This has been planned for a very long time and these undertakings are massive and not easily shifted. Doing so unnoticed would be impossible."

"Do you have any idea of Asano's role in all this?" Trenchant asked.

"I believe the Purity church is out there, preparing a messenger invasion to follow up once the Builder calls its forces back to the astral, at the end of the monster surge. The

summoning event we've seen was premature and halted, but what if it wasn't? What if those things could just keep coming through? What we will need is someone to shut the gate, and the World-Phoenix is the one in charge of closing that kind of gate. And what it sent us was Jason Asano."

Jason didn't end up being the one who took Travis to see the church of Knowledge. Farrah volunteered for that role while Jason led his team to the Adventure Society to register locally for monster surge duty. Neil and Belinda grumbled about going back to work the day after they arrived but Humphrey gave a speech about not shirking and the need to learn how to work together all over again until Neil got up and set out just so Humphrey would stop talking.

The Adventure Society administration building didn't have people lined up outside the doors this time but was still incredibly busy. They were forced into one of several queues inching towards the front. Finally, they reached the front where the reception staff were rushing people through as quickly as they could. The functionary they met at the front of the queue quickly scribbled down their details, a pencil in one hand and a large stamp in the other.

"Does your team have an operational name?" she asked.

"Team Biscuit!" Humphrey said cheerfully.

"No!" Another Humphrey said as he grabbed the moustachioed first one by the collar. The first Humphrey turned into a puppy dangling from the scruff of its neck, adorably waving helpless paws.

"That's not our team name," Humphrey told the functionary.

"Paperwork's been stamped, so it is now," she said, handing him the document.

"Maybe next time get your familiar under control. Now, please clear the line. You can take this to the jobs hall."

A dismayed Humphrey looked at the documentation in one hand and the puppy in the other as he let Jason push him out of the way.