

Chapter 477

It Will Not Be Fine

Liara Rimaros made her way back to the royal sky island, half-asleep in the back of a flying carriage. She'd been working without rest as the city was overrun with adventurers that had to be filtered through for potential Builder cultists and was finally going home to sleep.

The carriage was forced to stop on a floating platform close to the sky island for security inspection. No chances were being taken of an attack on the palace. Royal guards carefully inspected the driver and the carriage itself before opening the door. Liara herself stepped out and both she and the carriage interior were swept with inspection devices.

"I'm sorry for the trouble, Lady Liara."

"That's fine, Jhalid," Liara said. "I completely understand."

"Thank you, milady."

"How's that boy of yours, Jhalid?"

"A bit too much like his father, milady. Always learning the hard way."

"You turned out alright. I'm sure he'll grow into a fine young man."

"Thank you, milady."

Liara was from one of the more remote branches of the royal family. She was not close enough to the main branch to be called a princess, although she was entitled to a home on the royal sky island and to participate in the contests for the throne in her youth. She had known she would not be a match for the advantages the Storm Prince's upbringing had given him and had instead set her sight on adventuring.

That Storm Prince had predictably become the Storm King and Liara had never regretted her own choices. After adventuring her way up to gold-rank in less than two decades, the Adventure Society had recruited her for special operations. After years hunting down people with restricted essences, she had been moved to the Builder response team.

After completing the inspection, Liara was allowed back into the carriage and it completed its journey to the royal sky island. The carriage flew towards one of the rings that allowed passage through the island's defences and set down in a carriage yard.

The royal island was ostensibly a palace but was, in and of itself, a small city in the sky. In addition to the royal family, it held embassies from nations around the world and many of the oldest noble families kept townhouses on the island. By custom, the younger

members of the high aristocracy were raised there, allowing for diplomatic training and fostering potential future alliances by marriage.

Liara was no different. In her youth, she had been married to a local lordling to secure royal influence in that family's affairs. Although she and her husband lived largely separate lives, especially now their children were grown, it was a cordial union. They were more friends and occasional lovers than true companions but they were happy.

Rather than find transport, Liara used her gold-rank speed to flit through the streets, unnoticed by everyone but island security. She arrived at her townhouse to find her husband, Baseph, just leaving. He met her with a smile as she arrived.

"Hello Lee," he said. "I left you a note inside. Uncle wants me out managing the mines for the duration of the surge. I'm told that cousin Gibbie is having some problems and can't go."

Liara frowned.

"I think the problem might be your uncle telling Gibbie things he shouldn't. Gibbie's fruit basket was always missing a pair of firm plums but I can't blame him this time. I don't think you should go either."

"I'll be safe. You know how fortified that place is. Most of the fortress is completely under the sea bed."

"Alright, but don't take unnecessary chances. If you see anything that isn't just monsters, you contact the Adventure Society. Immediately."

"You mean like a fish?"

"Baseph, look at my face."

"Yes, dear."

"How well do you think charm is going to work on me right now?"

"Sorry, dear. It won't be that bad, will it? I've heard they're expecting activity from the Builder but they're saying it'll be fine."

"Of course they're telling people that," Liara said. "They don't want to cause a panic. I can't tell you specifics, Bas, but it will not be fine."

"Alright, Lee. I still have the signal stone you gave me, even if everything else fails."

"If everything else fails, you'll be stuck in a hole at the bottom of the sea. I love that you think I'll somehow be able to save you from that but we all have limits. I'm serious, Baseph. Anything strange, you send word to the Adventure Society. Even if you're almost sure it's nothing."

"Alright," he said with a smile. "I'm lucky to have a wife that cares about me so much." He caught her up in an embrace.

“Oh, and Vesper’s inside.”

“What’s she doing here?” Liara wondered.

“Since when did Ves need a reason to come see you?” Baseph asked. “Did something happen?”

“Yes. There’s a monster surge on.”

“Dear, this is your sixth surge. I’ve never seen you like this.”

“This isn’t just another monster surge,” she said.

“The Builder cult has been running around for years.”

“Not like this,” she said. “Promise me you’ll be careful.”

“I’m pretty sure I just did.”

“Bas, you have to promise me.”

“Alright,” he said. “I promise.”

Liara found Vesper in the parlour, plundering the drinks cabinet.

“Hello, Lee. It’s been a little while. Want one?”

“Sure,” Liara said as she flopped onto a couch. “Things have been rather busy, which makes me wonder what you’re doing here. Not that you aren’t welcome at any time.”

Vesper walked over from the cabinet, handed Liara a glass and sat down next to her.

“You do look exhausted,” Vesper said. “Did you see Bas on the way out?”

Liara nodded as she sipped at her drink. It made her eyes shoot wide open.

“Yes, I’m not looking to get *that* relaxed. Can you even drink this at silver-rank without it killing you?”

“Sorry,” Vesper said. “Poison resistance, you know? It has to be the hard stuff.”

“That’s not hard; that’s boat cleaner. Why are you here, Ves? I need sleep.”

“I need your help with something delicate. It’s about the family and it needs to stay as quiet as possible.”

“What are you after?”

“I want you to pull the records of an Adventure Society member without anyone knowing about it.”

“I can’t do that if it’s anyone sensitive. What’s the name?”

“Jason Asano.”

Liara blinked.

“I knew I recognised that name,” she said. “Where do I know it from? It’s been bothering me.”

“You know about Asano?”

“He was assessed for potential cult affiliation,” Liara said. “Where did I hear that name from?”

“Zara,” Vesper said with a grimace.

“Zara? When would...?”

Liara took a folder from the dimensional pouch at her waist, set aside a picture of Jason from the folder and started flicking through papers inside. Vesper picked up the picture which showed Jason with an idiotic grin, holding up a sandwich.

“Why are you carrying Asano’s file around with you?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Is that the only picture you have?”

“It was the one the Magic Society had on file,” Liara said, still flicking through pages. “His abilities make him hard to track or record images of. You and Zara went off to the far side of nowhere and met Emir Bahadir. Was that place called Greenstone?”

“Yes,” Vesper confirmed.

“And then Zara came back and...”

“Yes.”

“And it was Asano?”

“Yes.”

“Did they really...?”

“No.”

“And now he’s alive again.”

“Which is why I’m here.”

“Well,” Liara said. “That’s a mess.”

She took another sip of boat cleaner.

“Is Asano making trouble?” she asked.

“Not yet. I only knew he was here because Aunt Pelli contacted me. He’s set up in a house on Arnote. The cloud house Zara failed to win because Bahadir rigged the contest.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Liara said, snapping the folder shut. “The more you dig into our Mr Asano, the more interesting nuggets fall out.”

“Can I see that?” Vesper asked, reaching for the folder.

“No,” Liara said. “The Builder response unit has access to Builder-related files that don’t appear in general Magic Society and Adventure Society records.”

“Lee, it’s me. And it’s about the family.”

“Being royalty means we should be more fastidious about the rules, Vesper, not less. We have to be examples.”

Vesper groaned.

"Lee, did you put the fun essence on the restricted list?"

"There's no such thing as a fun essence."

"Clearly. Maybe I should kill him after all. If anyone finds out, it would buy us another couple of years with a second period of formal mourning. I just need to make sure it looks like an accident. Or a monster. There is a monster surge happening. One more death won't be suspicious."

"Like your apparent desire to kill this man off, what Zara did is a violation of decency," Liara said. "You can't just pretend you secretly agreed to marry someone who is now conveniently dead to dodge a political marriage. Also, killing him would be a bad idea."

"I know. He's running around with Roland Remore's grandson. It's why I'll have to be careful."

"Please stop talking about murdering people."

"I'm not going to murder anyone," Vesper said. "I'll have him murdered. We have people for that, right? What about the Order of the Reaper? They're back, now."

"You stay away from them."

"You know something I don't?"

"I know a lot of things you don't, Vesper. Including morals, apparently. You shouldn't try killing Asano anyway. He probably won't stay dead."

"You know how he came back?"

"No, but I saw his certification from the church of Death and it said he's died four times. So far. It actually said so far on the certification. I've never seen that before."

"Four? You should ask the church of Death what's going on there."

"They never reveal details of resurrection, believe me. Especially since they announced that it would be harder a few years ago."

"Wasn't that right about the time Asano died?"

"He didn't have anything to do with that. He might have his secrets but he's hardly worth the gods changing the rules of magic over."

"Did you ask Asano how he came back?"

"All he would say is that coming back from the dead is kind of his thing. Once I saw his certification, that turned out to be not quite as facetious as I first thought."

"Zara's formal mourning period is almost up," Vesper said. "The timing of his arrival is suspicious."

"As I said: the boy has secrets," Liara conceded.

"Which are?"

"I don't know, Vesper. That's what makes them secret."

"Lee, this matters. This is not the time to provoke House Irios or to give them any more leverage than they already have. Zara's little lie could turn into big politics. We need to know Asano's intentions before we decide what to do with him."

"Then I recommend you talk to Aunt Zila. She is here for the surge, yes?"

"I've heard yes, although I haven't seen her."

"Then I suggest you change that and hope she's willing to listen."

Jason looked happily at the row of barbecues set up in front of his cloud house.

"I think you might need some more," Argy said, standing next to him.

"Argy, how many people did you invite?"

"About this many grills again should do it."

Jason looked at Argy, then back to the barbecues.

"I'm going to need more food."

An hour later, Jason was unloading more tables, more barbecues and a couple of spit roasters from his storage space, with Argy helping him set up. Farrah and Rufus came out of the cloud house to look everything over.

"Is this a barbecue or a festival?" Rufus asked.

"Good thing there's a lot of nice, open grass," Jason said. "Views are nice, too. This is going to be great."

"Yep," Farrah agreed. "Everybody is going to Wang Chung tonight."

Rufus turned from Farrah to Jason.

"What does your world do to people?"

"Rufus, you need to get over it," Jason said. "Farrah has joined the church of Airwolf and there's nothing you can do about it."

"Just to be clear," Farrah said, "I have absolutely not joined the church of Airwolf."

"It was the fourth season, wasn't it? The reused footage wasn't that bad."

"It was not the reused footage."

"You're more of a Greatest American Hero girl. I can get behind that."

"I am, actually, yeah."

"I hope the others find us soon," Rufus said. "I can't take being outnumbered like this."

"Oh, did you get in touch with your parents?" Jason asked Farrah.

"No," Farrah said. "The water link chambers are booked solid. The Adventure Society said they'd be notified along with our teams."

“That’s good,” Jason said. “We need to get you to them as soon as we’re done in Rimaros.”

“You should try the church of Death again,” Rufus said. “I was so caught up in seeing you that day that I didn’t think while you were there. They won’t be as busy as the Adventure Society. They may be willing to pass along word of your resurrection without it getting lost in the monster surge shuffle.”

“That’s a great idea,” Jason said.

“Tomorrow,” Farrah said. “Tonight we’re having a barbie.”

“I am not liking how alike you two are starting to sound,” Rufus said.

“We know, Rufus,” Jason said. “You’ve mentioned.”

“It’s time to add a new rule to the drinking game,” Farrah said. “I can’t wait to tell Gary.”

She called out to Argy, still moving picnic tables.

“Hey, Argy. Did you know Rufus’ family runs a school?”

“Yeah,” Argy called back. “He mentioned it to me yesterday.”

Jason and Farrah erupted with laughter.