

Chapter 597

More Than Just a Name

The streets of Livaros were thronging with people as the central areas were overtaken by a sprawling street festival. The market district was the heart of the post-surge celebrations, but it extended into the boutique store ward and even the Adventure Society campus. Tables had been brought out and food stalls were everywhere, while the Magic Society had released thousands of colour-changing paper lanterns that were drifting over the streets, illuminating everything in myriad colours.

Jason stood on a rooftop, his cloak dimmed down and blending into the shadows of the late evening. Sophie was standing beside him, significantly more obvious. The rest of their companions were elsewhere, either waiting at the meeting sight or in place for other tasks, all connected through voice chat.

“Ooh, the food smells wafting up here,” Jason said with yearning. “I could pop down there and grab us something real quick.”

“No,” Humphrey scolded. He, like the rest of the team, was positioned elsewhere. “We talked about this, Jason. You agreed to play the ominous harbinger, which means no popping down to check out food stalls.”

“It’s not like anyone would recognise me; I’d be completely anonymous.”

“That’s a lie and you know it,” Farrah said. “I’m betting that most of these food stalls are run by the people who run the same stalls at the market. Do not even bother trying to convince us that they won’t recognise you.”

“Not to mention that you have a very bad track record on staying anonymous,” Clive added.

“Sophie could go down there,” Jason said. “No one’s looking for her.”

“Thankfully,” Sophie added. “I’ve had quite enough of that in my life, thank you.”

“You want Sophie to go down there,” Humphrey said. “The most beautiful woman in the city, dressed head to toe in white adventuring gear. Very subtle.”

“You are such a suck-up,” Jason pouted.

“I think it’s sweet,” Belinda said. “But yes, she does rather stand out.”

Sophie stood out in her new armour of white with silver embellishments. Figure-hugging yet utterly flexible, like Sophie herself, it focused on mobility rather the protectiveness. She had acquired the armour while Jason was still in recovery, through Neil’s looting power, from an unusual ooze-type monster. She had not enjoyed fighting the silver-star jelly, but was very satisfied with the spoils.

“There are lots of adventurers out there,” Jason complained and Sophie put a hand on his shoulder.

“I asked Belinda to go around grabbing anything that looked good,” she said. “It’ll come out of her storage space nice and fresh. I know it’s not the same as being down there, but it’s something.”

Jason turned to look at Sophie, pushing the hood back off his head.

“Thank you,” he said, his smile an uncharacteristic non-smirk. “That’s really thoughtful of you.”

After a lifetime of mistrust, Sophie was still learning about companionship and her rare expression of bashfulness made Jason smile wider.

“Belinda was meant to be intercepting the target,” Humphrey said.

“I can do both,” Belinda said. “Jason’s going to sense him long before I can get eyes on him, anyway.”

“How are we doing with that?” Humphrey asked.

“We left his warded compound in the warehouse district with a couple of bodyguards,” Estella said through voice chat. “We took a carriage until we hit the festival crowds and then started moving on foot.”

Estella was also included in the voice chat as she directed Havi Estos to the meeting site.

“He doesn’t have a flight travel permit?” Neil asked.

“Temporarily suspended for the duration of the festival,” Estella explained. “He’s not happy about it, either.”

“Most of them have been suspended,” Rufus added.

“And the guilds aren’t happy about it either, from what I’m overhearing,” Belinda said. “You can tell a guild adventurer here more from their complaints than their gear, although anyone fully tooled up to fight monsters at a festival is probably a complete tool themselves.”

“I don’t like this,” Havi Estos said as he made his way through the crowd. “It’s the perfect chance to get in some assassinations. This week will probably see more of them than the rest of the year combined.”

“You’re worried about being assassinated,” Estella told him, “I can’t tell if you think too highly or too poorly about yourself.”

“Being assassinated isn’t a matter of character,” Havi said. “It’s a matter of being an obstacle to someone with no scruples.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t surround yourself with people lacking scruples. Look, no one is going to... oh, wow; that guy is definitely going to assassinate you.”

“What? What guy?”

The two bodyguards went on alert. They had shortswords as large weapons were generally less effective in the city, as well as being more attention-grabbing.

“That guy,” Estella said, pointing. “He’s hiding his aura fairly well, but I’m, you know, me.”

The man in question started running.

“Don’t chase,” Havi ordered his bodyguards. “He might be trying to lure you away.”

They carried on at a hustle, the bodyguards often rudely shouldering the way through the crowd. Only Estella noticed Belinda start trailing them, occasionally changing her face.

Like the tentacles of an octopus, arms made of darkness emerged from different shadows to drag people out of sight.

“That’s the fourth group that has been looking to kill this guy,” Jason said as he dropped the last unconscious man onto the pile on the roof. “He’s got more people after him than I do. Maybe he should be the one faking his identity and skipping town.”

“The people after him are a little lower on the threat scale,” Rufus pointed out.

“Still, four assassination attempts in one walk across town?”

“Not to mention the other two we stopped against unrelated people,” Humphrey said. “And I know for a fact that the Adventure Society has people quietly patrolling as well, so who knows how much is going on.”

“I wish you’d told me that earlier,” Jason said. “I almost tried to take one of them out until I realised from his aura that he was watch for threats, not being one. That would have been embarrassing.”

“Especially if you got your butt kicked,” Neil added.

“Yeah,” Jason agreed with a laugh.

“Estos was right about it being a prime chance for assassinations,” Estella said.

“Not to mention robbery,” Belinda added. “I’ve spotted I don’t know how many pickpockets. They know their business in this city, too. The deftness with which they dispel anti-theft wards is impressive. I might go find who taught them, swap some tips.”

“You’re not a thief anymore, Lindy,” Humphrey pointed out.

“Uh, yep,” Belinda agreed. “Definitely not.”

“Belinda..”

“We’re approaching the destination,” Estella notified them.

“Site is secure,” Rufus said.

“I put up some extra anti-surveillance magic,” Farrah said, “but what was already in place is surprisingly thorough.”

Havi Estos, Estella and the two bodyguards reached the boutique shopping district where the festival was still going on, but was a bit more subdued. This was where the festival-goers tended to be a little higher in the social hierarchy, and letting loose too much could have political repercussions. It was still a celebration, just more company barbecue than spring break in tone.

“Honestly, I didn’t think we’d get this far and only see one attacker,” Havi Estos said. “Perhaps I overestimated the danger.”

“Exactly,” agreed Estella, who had shared none of her party interface communication with him.

They arrived at a plain cream-coloured storefront with no signage. There was only a display window with a dummy draped in a linen suit and topped with a Panama hat. The door opened at their approach, revealing a stern-faced Rufus. Havi looked at the tall, leanly-muscular adventure in front of him with midnight skin and striking good looks. The light of the colourful lanterns overhead was reflected from the man’s bald head so well that Havi absently wondered if he used some kind of wax polish.

“Havi Estos?” Rufus asked in a voice that made Havi wish he could just run instead of answering. This whole night was the reason he liked conducting business from his very secure home, but he felt he had little choice. He knew enough about Asano and his associates to recognise the man standing in front of him, and who that man’s grandfather was.

Havi was a very well connected man, so he had become aware that Jason Asano was now a person of significance. Perhaps Asano didn’t care that Havi once sent Estella to spy on him – he certainly seemed to have settled things with Estella Warnock. Havi didn’t have a respected uncle to mend fences, however. What he did have was information.

Like many in Rimaros, Havi had been tracking down every piece of information on Jason Asano. He had a broader base of information gathering than most, stretching from high nobility to base criminals. He was confident that no one else had yet realised the connections between Asano and local underworld figure Killian Laurent, but it was likely only a matter of time. As such, Havi needed to exploit that knowledge before it lost its value to him.

“Yes, I’m Havi Estos. Is Mr Asano inside?”

“Jason Asano has been with you for some time,” Rufus said.

Havi and his bodyguard looked around and found Jason standing next to Estella.

Havi tilted his head, feeling a dissonance in his mind. He suddenly realised that Asano had been walking with them for the last couple of streets, but for some reason, Havi had been ignoring his presence.

The bodyguards moved their hands toward their swords but their silver-rank auras were suddenly annihilated as if they weren’t there and they froze, stricken with fear. Asano’s presence was uncanny, almost part of the darkness as his cloak and the twilight seemed to blend together, making what was shadow and what was person unclear. How he did that while standing in the open Havi was unsure. It was like an optical illusion, his eyes sliding off as he tried to make out what was real and what wasn’t. It didn’t help that Asano didn’t register at all to Havi’s aura senses, as if he were looking at a picture and not the man himself.

“Jason,” Havi said. “You do prefer to be called Jason, right?”

“My friends call me Jason, Mr Estos.”

Asano’s voice had the icy hardness of winter granite, wholly unlike their previous meeting. Havi found himself missing the man’s previously friendly demeanour very much.

“Go inside, Mr Estos,” Rufus ordered. “Your employees can leave.”

Havi looked at the bodyguards that suddenly felt extremely inadequate to his needs.

“I need to get home safely after this meeting,” he said.

“If you go home again,” Jason said, “you will be delivered safely.”

Havi paled at Jason’s use of the word ‘if’ rather than ‘when.’ Even so, he dutifully followed Rufus inside. Waiting for them was a group of people Estos recognised from his information gathering on Asano. Just looking at the people around him was enough to know that Asano was not someone to take lightly. From prominent members of the Geller and Remore families to Clive Standish, whose relationship with the Magic Society would be a whole other investigation. If they had been in Vitesse instead of the far side of the world, no one in their right mind would dismiss the group.

The other person present was Alejandro Albericci, the proprietor of the tailor shop in which they stood. Albericci had his own formidable connections in Rimaros society and was not someone Havi would ever be interested in getting on the bad side of.

“Thank you for the use of your property, Mr Albericci,” Rufus said.

“Consider it my apology for being used to political ends when you first graced my establishment. I will go now, but be assured that no sound will escape these walls. And, as Miss Hurin can attest, it would take formidable effort to observe the interior magically.”

Alejandro departed through a rear door, leaving Havi surrounded as Belinda and Sophie came in to stand by Jason, Belinda closing the door behind her. Havi steeled his nerve to speak.

“Jas— Mr Asano. I’d like to—”

“Killian Laurent,” Jason said, cutting him off. “That name is the only reason any of us are here. I do hope you have more than just a name.”

“He was here, in the Storm Kingdom. After he plundered the wealth of the Silva family in Greenstone, he came here and set himself up in Jaitari.”

The three islands that made up the city of Rimaros were not the most populous regions of the Storm Kingdom. The largest concentrations of people were on a landmass in the centre of the Sea of Storms. Comprised of what was, in Jason's world, Cuba, Haiti and the Dominican Republic, was a single island; the largest in the Sea of Storms by far. Jaitari was the largest and most populous city on the island and the Storm Kingdom overall.

“Why here?” Jason asked. “Of all the places in the world, why the one that just happened to be where I arrived?”

“He was here long before you arrived,” Havi said. “I have no idea how you arrived here, or why. I’ve heard rumours that Soramir Rimaros knows, but even my ability to gather information has limits. But Laurent came here because he has family. Someone in the Order of Redeeming Light. A priest. The Adventure Society has him in custody, now. Maybe he can tell you more.”

“You think he can give us Killian Laurent?”

“I can give you Killian Laurent. When your name started spreading around, Mr Asano, Laurent heard about it and decided to get out. But that was a bad idea during a monster surge, especially this one. Too many people tracking too many things. Liquidating his assets and getting out of the region without drawing the attention of people hunting for Builder cultists or Order of Redeeming Light members meant relying on some extremely shady people. The kind of people that won’t talk to the government or the Adventure Society, but will talk to me.”

“You know where he is now?” Jason asked.

“No,” Havi said. “By design. If I went digging, word could get to him, sooner or later. I’m not the only information broker out there and he’s an extremely cautious man. But I am

certain I can find him, in fairly short order. Then it will be on you to move fast enough to get him before he moves again.”

Jason didn't respond for a long time, leaving Havi to look at the alien eyes that were all that could be seen from the otherwise-impenetrable darkness of Jason's hood.

"There's something else," Havi said. He hadn't intended to share this and instead use it to build his own influence base, but Jason's silent stare had unnerved him. "Laurent was the one who hired the adventurer that teleported the Order of Redeeming Light's people off that island. The new one that used to be the flying Builder city. He did it because his brother asked. The priest I talked about."

There was more silence. A line of dark flames moved along the ground, from which a portal arch of dark crystal noiselessly emerged. The dark flames rose to fill the arch, becoming an active portal.

"Go home, Mr Estos," Jason said.

"Do you want me to start narrowing down Laurent's location?"

"Soon. We'll be in touch."

Havi was uncertain about walking through a portal he didn't entirely trust, but he liked the idea a lot more than refusing to do so and staying surrounded by these people. He stepped through and emerged in his own home. The home that was warded against teleportation and portals. He turned to look at the portal he had just stepped through and watched it descend back into the floor, leaving a line of dark flames that vanished in turn.

Humphrey caught Jason as he collapsed, the moment Havi had vanished.

"Yeah, that was worse," he croaked. "I have to stop using this astral gate."

"If you'd just let me study it," Clive said, "maybe we could alleviate the issues."

"If Dawn said to wait for higher rank," Farrah told him, "then it's best to wait."

"I'm going to teleport Jason back to the pagoda," Humphrey said. "Rufus, please thank Mr Albericci again and let him know that we're done."