

Chapter 553

A Matter of Values

Belinda repeatedly thwapped at Sophie's head with a softcover notebook as Sophie fended her off with her arms. As Sophie shifted in her seat under the attacks, the puppy napping in her lap made a grumbling sound.

"What were you thinking, running off by yourself into some trap?" Belinda scolded as she dropped into a cloud chair and jabbed the notebook in Jason's direction. "This guy was the one who had to bring you back. This guy! Have you learned nothing from the mistakes he keeps making, over and over?"

"Hey..."

"He's been kidnapped, tortured, killed. Forced to wear those shirts."

"What's wrong with my shirts?"

"Didn't you just get a whole wardrobe put together?" Neil asked. "You still dress like a tropical garden was violently ill."

Jason's team was gathered in the cloud house. In the wake of the Purity church's attempt to trap Sophie, the team was placed on standby under the direction of the Builder response unit, which was in the process of being reorganised. Originally formed in response to the original wave of Builder cult activity, it now had anti-Purity operations rolled into its purview.

The head of what was now being called the Office of Organised Enemy Response was the same as when it had been the Builder response unit, Ramon Keel. After Liara had reported on Sophie's encounter, he had cancelled all the contracts Jason's team were currently assigned. He ordered them to go on standby, which they were allowed to do at the cloud house. Keel had also sent someone who was apparently on the way to debrief Sophie.

In the meantime, the team was lounging around on an open deck. They were upbraiding Sophie for her recklessness, which she felt was unfair with Jason sitting right there.

"Mr Asano has paid the price for his risk-taking more than once," Shade pointed out. "More importantly, so have the people around him – yourself included, Miss Wexler."

"Not everyone gets to come back for another go-around after they get clipped," Neil said. "If Jason gets killed again, it's probably fine, but we'd rather keep you around."

"Much rather," Humphrey said. He was already sharing a couch with Sophie but shuffled a little closer.

"Is no one going to reject the idea of me getting killed being alright?" Jason asked.

"What about the plan you're working on?" Sophie asked Belinda. "That's much riskier than taking a quick peek at some enemies."

"It's a calculated risk," Belinda said. "Also, it's our plan, not an enemy's. That's very different from looking at a trap and wandering in of my own volition."

"She isn't wrong about the dangers, though," Humphrey said. "Any time you want to back out, we'll all support you."

"More than if you go through with it, in fact," Clive said. "I'm still against it."

"It probably won't even happen," Belinda said. "The chance necessary to make it work isn't ever likely to present itself."

"It seems more likely now that we're being kept on standby," Humphrey said. "It seems the Adventure Society wants to use us against the Purity worshippers."

"They're just giving in to the inevitable," Neil said. "Jason always ends up in the middle whenever some insane thing happens. Interdimensional invasions, a city sinking into the ocean. Some god going insane and trying to turn the moon into a giant biscuit."

"Giant biscuit?" Puppy-Stash asked, picking up his head with a sleepy expression. Sophie scratched him behind the ears and he contentedly settled.

Jason and Clive were in the waterfall room, working on their special project when Jason sensed a presence outside the cloud house. It was a gold-rank stealth specialist, so Jason hadn't sensed him until he revealed his aura. Jason didn't recognise it, but the arrival of whoever it was left Sophie disturbed. She and Rufus had been sparring on the grass beside the river, watched by the neighbourhood children. The moment the new aura appeared, Jason felt anger flood into her aura and she stormed into the cloud house.

One of Shade's bodies approached the visitor and Jason closed his eyes to share his familiar's vision. It turned out that he didn't recognise the visitor's aura because the last time Jason had seen him, his aura senses had been too weak.

Callum Morse was a former teammate of Emir Bahadir, as well as of Rufus' parents. Jason had met him in Greenstone as he assisted Emir and the early efforts against the Builder. Jason shadow-jumped through Shade to join Rufus and Callum who were talking, but there was an air of awkwardness between them after Sophie's departure.

"...is working with the church of the Healer, here in the city," Rufus was saying as Jason arrived. The two men turned as Jason emerged from Shade's body.

"Cal," Jason greeted the newcomer, friendly but with a noticeable reserve in his tone.

"Asano."

“What brings you to Rimaros?”

“May I come inside so we can talk?”

“I’m afraid not, Cal.”

“Wexler told you about what happened, then.”

“About how you and Emir dangled her as bait, and the moment it turns out her mother is still alive, you shut her down? She might have mentioned it, yeah.”

“There are important developments,” Callum said. “Things best not discussed in the open. We should take this inside.”

“Here’s the thing, Cal,” Jason said. “Sophie doesn’t want you here, and she’s my team. You’re not. So, if she wants you gone, you’re gone. Sorry.”

“This is more important than one person’s feelings,” Callum said, annoyance showing in his expression.

“It always is,” Jason said, his voice relaxed and a little sad. “There always seems to be someone way more powerful who can’t wait to explain how important things are afoot. How you have to put aside your small concerns to work with someone who screwed you over because you need to act for the greater good. Is that more or less your pitch?”

Callum frowned.

“Yeah, that’s what I figured,” Jason said. “I’ve been down that road, Cal. Didn’t like where it took me and I’m not letting you lead my team down the same path.”

“Asano—”

“We’re silver-rankers, Cal. I’ve done my time punching above my weight and I’ve lost people doing it. You have gold-rank problems, go find some gold-rankers to help you.”

“I know where Wexler’s mother is.”

Jason’s eyebrows rose.

“Is that so?”

“It is.”

“So, where is she?”

“It’s complicated. We should go somewhere private and discuss it. If not your cloud house, then—”

“It’s not complicated, Cal. Maybe on your end, but on mine, it’s nice and simple. At the end of this conversation, you’ll either be the guy who knew where Sophie’s mother was and told us, or the guy who knew and didn’t.”

Callum’s shoulders slumped slightly.

“You used to have higher ideals, Asano.”

“Yep.”

“What happened to you?”

“I lived up to them.”

Jason stepped into Shade’s body and vanished.

“Cal,” Arabelle said, collecting her old teammate in a quick hug. “What are you doing here during a surge? I would have thought you’d be hunting monsters and cultists, barely stopping to sleep.”

“You know that I’ve been investigating the Order of the Reaper.”

“You’re still doing that?”

She guided him to a seat in the consulting office she had been assigned in the temple of the healer in Rimaros.

“Yes,” Callum told her. “They are a more dangerous organisation than people realise. They always have been, since their inception.”

Arabelle narrowed her eyes.

“This isn’t just you helping Emir, is it?”

“This is bigger than Emir.”

“Well, I won’t pry. You’ve always been the mysterious one.”

“I appreciate that, although the secret is not exceptional. I even intended to share it, if I could get people to listen.”

Arabelle raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

“You’re having a problem?”

“I went to speak with Sophie Wexler.”

“She’s talking to you, now?”

“No,” Callum said. “Her anger is foolish. Pursuing her mother meant getting involved with the order. Doing so at bronze-rank would have meant nothing but a swift death.”

“The pursuit would have been foolish, Cal, it’s true, but you and Emir. You dangled something precious that she’s never had in front of her and then you told her that not only can she not have it, but that it’s hidden and she’s not allowed to go looking for it. I’d say her anger is completely justified.”

“She’s angry that we kept her from certain death.”

“Some of us have more emotions than one of the Builder’s clockwork monsters, Cal.”

“I have feelings, Belle. You know that better than anyone. I just don’t let them compromise my judgement.”

“That’s fine, Cal, but you can’t expect everyone else to meet your standards.”

"Someone should. I attempted to engage her team but was rebuffed by Jason Asano. Should I approach another member of their team, away from the cloud house?"

"No, Cal. You'll only make them reject you all the more."

"As I said: compromised judgement."

Arabelle looked at him with an indulgent smile.

"It's a matter of values, Cal. What matters to you might not matter to them, and the same is true from their perspective."

"Asano refused to listen long enough to learn how important what I need them for is."

Arabelle burst out laughing.

"I can imagine how that went," she said. "Some variation of go find some gold-rankers to help you?"

"Yes. What is happening with Asano? His cloud house is bizarre. It's completely different compared to Emir's."

"Jason and Emir have moments where they are quite alike but are also very different. This is especially true in the directions their paths are taking them, which is precisely your problem. You're the latest in a line of powerful people trying to tell Jason what to do. Not only does that inherently rankle him but if he's standing up to gods and great astral beings, he's hardly going to let you push him around."

"Back in Greenstone, he had the resolve to do what was necessary to what was right. He lost that in his time away."

The amusement passed from Arabelle's face and the flint in the tone of her next words arrested his attention.

"Cal, I know I give you many pieces of advice, but you should listen very carefully to this one: do not test Jason Asano's resolve. He reached a point where it was all he had left and he's just starting to heal from that. I don't know what the future holds for him, but I've seen the other fish in his pond. If he grows up the wrong way, I suspect we will all come to regret it."

"Really, Belle? You believe in destiny, now?"

"Do you know who Soramir Rimaros is, Cal?"

"I do."

"There's a friend of Jason's. Soramir Rimaros seems to be the only one who fully understands who she is, and it scares him."

"Who is she?"

"Dawn. She is or, I gather, was, the First Sister of the order of the World-Phoenix. I'm not sure what that means exactly... Cal?"

Callum was shivering in his seat.

"Are you sure that's right?" he asked, his voice barely a whisper. "First Sister?"

"Yes. She told me that it's very important that I help Jason get better."

"Then do it," Callum said. "Are you saying this woman is here?"

"She's been staying in the royal palace. What does this First Sister business mean?"

"That whatever is going on is bigger than just our world."

"I knew that already. You asked what happened to Asano. His entire world was in danger and he was stuck saving it because everyone else either couldn't or wouldn't."

"He said he was tired of powerful people telling him what to do. I thought he meant gold-rankers."

"No, Cal. When he looks at gold rankers, he's not looking up. If you came to him and told him to put aside his values and concerns to do what you tell him, you should count yourself lucky he didn't let you into his cloud house. You might not have come back out."

"He can't be that strong."

"He's put a lot of trust in me, but I'm certain that he hasn't told me all its secrets. What he has told me is that there's a power involved that he has only just begun to tap into."

Callum ran a hand over his face, eyes unfocused as he was lost in thought.

"Why does whatever you need have to involve Asano's team?" Arabelle asked him.

"Because it's about Wexler's mother."

"Oh, Cal. That's thin ice you're looking to walk out onto."

"So I'm beginning to realise."

"We should talk about Cal," Rufus said to Jason.

"I know, right?" Jason said. "I'm assuming you're talking about my awesome exit line for that conversation. Mic drop, disappear into shadows. Such a boss move."

"Who's Mike?"