

Chapter 216

My Name is Jason Asano

Elizabeth Silva stirred when she felt something press down on her large, canopy bed. There was a young man in a dark suit sitting on the other side, cross-legged. She opened her mouth to call for her guards, before stopping herself. If they could have helped, they already would have. Her bronze rank aura senses couldn't detect the man's aura at all, which meant that he was dangerous.

"Hello, Miss Silva," the man said. "I'm sorry to call on you so late."

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I want you to understand that Old City is changing," the man said. "The days of criminal rule are coming to an end. Other members of your family have come to understand this, but you've only seen weakness instead of wisdom and pushed them all the harder. People are being hurt, innocent people, and I'm here to convince you to stop."

"So you're one of Dorgan's dogs," she said.

"No," the man said. "I'm an adventurer, and I have a contract. To make people like you understand that these are new times. No one is saying you can't be a crime boss. Wiping out crime altogether would be pointless and foolish to even attempt, and having people like you retain a measure of power keeps the chaos to a minimum. But that's what you get: a measure. The days of the Big Three are over and trying to bring them back will only cause more bloodshed, which I promise will include yours."

"So the high and mighty Island government is going to bring us to heel with death threats?"

The young man smiled.

"If I have to come back here, Miss Silva, you'll find my mercy does not extend to killing you. My name is Jason Asano."

A cold fear washed over her body as she recognised the name.

"Your cousin went to some effort to destroy me. I took longer than I should have to rectify the scenario and my friends interrupted before I had my taste of recompense. I would advise against being the means by which I assuage my disappointment."

A shadow rose up behind Asano, moved over his body and he was gone.

Belinda had finally undertaken her field assessment and the team were gathered in the marshalling yard to await her return. With them was a rather nervous Jory. The marshalling yard was crowded, with many new essence users that had appeared in the

wake of the Reaper trials. The drop in market price for essences wasn't a true democratisation of power, but many of Greenstone's only reasonably well-off families were adding adventurers to their ranks. An adventurer who found success would be able to raise their family up with them.

Normally, the crowd gathered waiting would be the families of the wealthy and powerful. This had been the case when Jason took his field assessment. Before the expedition disaster shook their faith, they had been so proud, so sure of themselves. In the wake of that, some families had realised their errors and corrected. They instituted new training programs for their essence users, frequently turning to the more successful adventuring families like the Cavendish, Mercers and Geller clans for guidance. This helped cement such families at the top of the Greenstone pile.

Other families had been looking for anywhere but themselves to place the blame. Loudly decrying the failures of Danielle Geller and Elspeth Arella, they had gone so far as to seek restitution from the Gellers and the Adventure Society itself.

The results of these different approaches were reflected in the changes brought about by the Adventure Society's inquiry team. The families that looked to fix their mistakes and used the people they lost as a chance to grow and improve, their positions within the Adventure Society improved in kind. After the sweeping demotions, these were the groups that most frequently had their previous rankings reinstated.

Those that made an enemy of the Adventure Society obviously fared less well. Arguably the single most powerful political entity on the planet, the Adventure Society had no time for the admonitions of some lower-tier aristocrats in one provincial city. Those families found their demotions upheld, even suffering additional waves of demotion. Many found their family members had their Adventure Society membership revoked entirely.

Oddly, the outcry of fools railing against them was helpful to both Danielle Geller and Elspeth Arella. The more they were blamed, the more clearly the blame fell on systemic problems within the local adventurer culture that neither Danielle nor Arella were responsible for. Danielle spent most of her time away from the city, and whatever revelations had come out regarding her motivations, Arella had been taking concrete steps to rectify the corruption within her branch.

While the old adventuring families were undergoing changes in the wake of the expedition, the people gathered in the marshalling yard represented a new, post-expedition movement in Greenstone. Where the old guard had a new sense of caution and humility, these new adventurers were filled with optimism and hope.

The people around Jason's team were more aspirational than established, anxious for the return of the person they had placed all their hopes on. For many families, having an adventurer amongst them was a chance to lift all of them up.

Jason knew that the reality was more harsh. Even amongst Greenstone's elite, only a handful of families were producing quality adventurers. Jason had seen the results of shattered illusions in young adventurers, like those who fell under the sway of insidious nobility like Thadwick Mercer or criminals like Cole Silva. Such people rarely met good ends. Of those that had followed Thadwick, half had ended up dead at Jason's own hand. He at least took solace that some of the others had managed to find fresh beginnings.

Jason considered group that had fallen under Thadwick's thumb. In the course of investigating Thadwick's shady land-grab scheme, Jason had decided the fate of most of them one way or another. The ones who had come for him before had died at his hands.

Months later he was still troubled by how quickly and easily he had turned to killing. He wondered if letting them go would have been better, but they had come for him once before and brought larger numbers the second time. Perhaps the longer he left it, the more killing it would have meant in the end.

Two of Thadwick's former lackeys had managed to find some measure of redemption. Dean was the one Jason had managed to put back on the straight and narrow. Disillusioned when his dreams of being a grand adventurer fell flat, he had been pulled into Thadwick's orbit at his lowest point. Jason helped him find his way back, and while he was never going to be an exceptional adventurer, there was still a place for him in Greenstone's Adventure Society.

The other of the pair was Jerrick. Where Dean had surrendered immediately that day, Jerrick had fought it out, with Jason taking him alive. Rather than being tried, he had been stricken from the Adventure Society as part of the quiet covering-up of Thadwick's activities. After Thadwick, Jerrick had fallen in with Cole Silva. Then risked everything to betray Silva and lead Jason's companions to him in his hour of greatest need.

Whether or not it was a cynical choice to try and get his way back into the Adventure Society, Jason didn't much care. When asked for his input, he voiced no objection to Jerrick's reinstatement to the Adventure Society. Jason met with him once after his reinstatement, advising him to work his way up using his own strength, rather than attach himself to others. Whether Jerrick took his advice or not was up to him, no longer Jason's concern.

Caught up in his thoughts, Jason was stirred out of them by the attention his team was getting. His aura senses detected the attention of normal people with no way to

control their own auras. Humphrey and himself were both fairly well known and his entire team were expensively outfitted. Jason had finally taken Neil into Gilbert's Resilient Attire For the Discerning Gentleman and Neil had come out looking annoyingly good.

Occasionally, someone would try and make a social approach, only to think better of it. Jason was helping this along with the subtle aura he was projecting to heighten their unease. It was a trick he had picked up from Humphrey's mother, who had been showing him some nuances of aura control normally held off until bronze or even silver rank.

"Has my mother spoken to you yet about the training program she was talking about?" Humphrey asked Jason.

"She's mentioned it," Jason said. "I don't hate the idea of what they're doing."

Danielle and Arella had a strained relationship since the expedition, but both women recognised that as important figures in the adventuring community they would need to put aside their differences. Danielle had told Jason about a program they were looking to develop, offering the new wave of adventurers some basic training. The goal was to prevent too many from falling into the patterns that had put so many essence users under the sway of the Big Three.

"Mother quietly thinks they can change the entire tenor of Greenstone's adventuring culture," Humphrey said.

"Her and the director seem determined to have something good come out of their shared mistake," Jason said. "I have a lot of respect for that."

"What do you think?" Humphrey asked. "Are you going to join in?"

"I'm not sure I'm qualified to teach anyone anything," Jason said. "This time last year I didn't even believe in magic."

"It's just fundamental aura control," Humphrey said. "Are you seriously going to stand there, using your aura like that, and say you can't teach someone the basics?"

"What's she roped you into teaching?" Jason asked.

"Basic martial technique. She's roped in a bunch of people, hasn't she, Sophie?"

"If the Adventure Society is paying, I'll take it," Sophie said.

"I've agreed to join in, too," Neil said. "Not to teach anything, but make sure Sophie's instruction doesn't kill anyone."

"I'm not responsible for other people being weak," Sophie said.

"Actually," Jason said, "If you've agreed to teach people to fight, you're directly responsible for them being weak."

She tilted her head thoughtfully. "Huh. I guess you're right."

The first wagon full of would-be adventurers arrived in the marshalling yard. It was a large intake, so they had gone out in separate groups.

“She’s going to pass, right?” Jory asked nervously.

“Of course she will,” Sophie said. “Right?”

“Right,” Neil said. “She has her full set of powers and she’s been on a road contract. She’s more qualified than any of us were for our assessments.”

“So, what next?” Neil asked. “Back to adventuring?”

“We need to be looking for the right contracts, ones that will get us to bronze,” Humphrey said. “The hardest iron-rank contracts we can find, plus any bronze ones we can get. Now Jason is back to three stars, the application process to claim a bronze-rank contract is much simpler.”

“We can do that?” Neil asked.

“It isn’t done in Greenstone a lot,” Humphrey said. “Beth Cavendish and her team have been taking some bronze-rank contracts, since the Reaper trials. The approval process is a pain unless you have a three star, which she is.”

Groups of would-be adventurers started arriving, including Belinda’s and she dashed over to share hugs with Sophie and Jory.

“Any problems?” Jason asked.

“I’m quietly confident,” Belinda said. “I thought Vincent would go easy on me, though. Aren’t he and Rufus a thing?”

“The fact that he didn’t go easy on you is the reason he and Rufus are a thing,” Jason said. “They’re both big on integrity.”

With the whole team officially on the Adventure Society rolls, they threw themselves into contracts, with an eye to raising their abilities. Belinda and Sophie had the most abilities in need of raising, so the team put them forward more than the others. Aside from Clive, each member of the team had their own new powers to master, though.

Clive was the closest to hitting bronze, having been an adventurer for the longest and possessing the accelerated advancement speed of a human. He was quietly letting the others take the forefront in the training, not wanting to reach bronze yet. If it was possible to access the Order of the Reaper’s astral space, it was most likely that the iron-rank restriction was still in place. Once inside they would all be free to hit bronze rank, as some of the Reaper trial participants had done the first time through. Leaving the space had not been an issue for them.

For Jason it was his familiars that required the most work but his real attention was on path of shadows, his shadow teleport ability. He had only told Clive that there was a chance of finding a way back into the Order of the Reaper's astral space and Clive had been quietly working on the issue using information both from Emir's people and from Shade.

The iron-rank contracts were a chance for Belinda to keep cutting her teeth on iron rank monsters, since her abilities were at the lowest level on the team. They continued the technique they had learned from Henrietta of mixing up combinations of team members and solo operations to push her into using different powers. The team was always on hand to step in if something went wrong.

The others were seeking out large groups of iron-rank monsters, or bronze-rank ones when they could get them. Humphrey and Jason would even take them on alone, both having powers that helped them to bridge the rank gap.

As the mild desert winter moved almost imperceptibly into spring, the team took an unconventional contract. East of Greenstone, inland beyond the desert, lay the veldt. The people there were hardy and tough, beyond the reach of the desert astral space and its oases. They rarely called on the Adventure Society, but had sent word to Greenstone that a group of essence user bandits had taken up in their area.

The inhabitants of the veldt kept mostly to themselves and even when it came to monsters they usually handled them on their own. The use of every essence found by the loose-knit band of communities was collectively decided on, with a small group of local monster hunters serving them all. They would only turn to the Adventure Society in Greenstone if something beyond their abilities turned up. The people had an isolationist pride, but also a practicality born of hardscrabble survivalist principles.

Led by a bronze-ranker and with too many essence users for the locals to deal with, the bandits had taken over a whole town, killing most of the residents and enslaving the rest. They had started raiding the other small towns of the veldt, trading loot and slaves to the nomadic tribes of the north.

When Elspeth Arella had offered them the contract, Jason and Humphrey had discussed at length whether to take it. With the number of bandits, the remoteness of their location and the chaos they had caused, there was no stipulation for capture in the contract. The order was to put them all down.

Jason was reluctant but Humphrey had been adamant.

"Jason, those people are going to die. The Adventure Society will send someone out there to kill them and not everyone has your scruples. I'd rather do it out of a sense of

responsibility than send someone looking for a chance to kill actual people instead of monsters.”

“Are there really adventurers that bloodthirsty?” Jason asked.

“Yes,” Humphrey said. “I’ve heard stories from my family. Been told how to recognise the signs of adventurers I should never team up with. The kind of people who will kill the bandits and then kill their victims because they can. Then they’ll blame it on the bandits and no one can say otherwise.”

“And the Adventure Society allows this?”

“Of course not,” Jason said. “But out in the wilderness, who’s to say what happened? Every now and again there’ll be a push to implement rules about using recording crystals when the contract is to take down real people but there is always resistance. There are some valid arguments against it, like the recording crystals being detectable, but mostly adventurers don’t like anything that reeks of shackles.”

“I can sympathise,” Jason said.

Eventually Jason came around. They had taken a boat upriver, then Clive requisitioned a Magic Society skimmer from the local depot and they made their way into the veldt. It was there that they met with Keith of the local monster hunters, who led them to the bandit town. Jason had gone in alone to scout before returning to the team.

He had discovered that the bandits were from Greenstone. Criminal essence users from the Silva and Ventress organisations, they had seen the changes coming and left the city altogether, knowing the Big Three would no longer provide them with the same level of reward for big fish in a small pond. Many feared they would be held to account for past misdeeds, using their power within the criminal underworld to live out their most depraved desires.

Under a charismatic leader, they had gone out into the veldt where they believed the Greenstone authorities would not follow. Without the controlling hand, however, they had gone wild. The escalating series of atrocities they were carrying out as they raided the local townships had quickly led the locals to call on the Adventure Society.

After scouting out their town, Jason told his team that he wanted to handle the bandits alone. They immediately refused, but just as Humphrey had talked him into taking the contract, he talked them into letting him do it alone. They were reluctant but this situation was nothing like when he was taken by Silva. He would be fighting on his own terms, with his team nearby to provide backup if things went wrong. The town, he argued, was perfectly set up for him to fight using tactics that would allow him to use his abilities to their fullest.

It took Jason some time to get them to come around. Ultimately, they were convinced by his determination and resolve. The unflinching hardness of his eyes was a perfect reflection of his aura. Once they agreed, their local guide was flabbergasted.

“He’s just one iron-ranker!”

Jason didn’t respond as his shadow rose up, passing over him and he vanished. Clive sent an expensive, long-range recording crystal flying high up over the town. A projection crystal hovered in front of them, showing what the first crystal recorded.

“You’ll be able to see what happens for yourself,” Clive said.