

Chapter 499

I Can Do Sleazy

“Why are you willing to toss Zara’s reputation into the fire?” Jason asked. “How does that help you with the Irios family?”

Vesper looked unhappy but Liara, sitting next to her, nudged her shoulder.

“You might as well tell him,” she said. “He’ll be more trouble than you think if you try to lead him around by the nose, believe me. You think Zara is bad? He’s worse. When he decides he’s not going along with your plan, he *commits*.”

“You didn’t tell her about us running into each other out west?” Jason asked.

“This isn’t about fighting some rogue priests in the middle of nowhere,” Vesper said. “This is the heart of the nation, with a lot of eyes on us. The marital affairs of some nobility might not mean anything to you, but lives are in the balance.”

The amused smile dropped from Jason’s face.

“I’m aware of the stakes, Princess. I understand how critical the Irios family is during a monster surge and the ramifications of them falling out with the royal family. I know that in politics, reputation is both sword and shield. All I want is a look at the snake pit before you ask me to jump in.”

“We’re not looking for any initiative from you,” Vesper said. “Telling you any more than what you need to understand is just inviting trouble.”

Jason resisted the urge to get up and leave. He closed his eyes and calmed his mind before opening them again.

“I get it,” he said. “You’ve been saddled with managing a situation and I’m floating in the middle like a turd you’re not allowed to fish out of the punch bowl.”

“Charming.”

“You need to control the variables and I’m a factor out of your control, so you want to put me in a box as much as you can. But that’s not going to work, Princess. I’ve been in a lot of boxes and I just can’t seem to stop poking holes in them.”

“You agreed to help us with this.”

“I agreed to participate, not to serve. I do recognise the importance of what’s happening here and I’m looking to help, not make things harder for you. But I’m not just wandering blindly into whatever situation you want, either.”

“So, what do you want?” Vesper asked.

“To know what I’m walking into. It’s a reasonable request and I think you know that, or they’d have assigned someone smarter to this. I realise that you’re under a lot of pressure

to get this right and I know that my general demeanour doesn't always inspire confidence. How about we both take a step back? You take off your princess hat, I'll take off my clown shoes and maybe we can figure out how to move forward without stabbing one another."

Vesper sat back in her chair, giving Jason an assessing look.

"Alright," she said. "This situation is complicated enough without us being at odds."

"Which brings me back to my question," Jason said. "What does burning Zara's reputation get you? You want me to come in and play the dashing man of mystery that captured her heart, but all that does is make her look like a naïve girl. Your goal is to strengthen ties with the Irios family, but just saying she's an idiot doesn't help that much, even if I am the most swashbuckling purveyor of derring-do ever to swan in from another universe."

"You want to play at this level, Mr Asano? If you mean what you say about wanting to help more than hurt, I need to know you aren't going to blunder around causing more problems than you solve."

"What kind of assurances are you looking for?" Jason asked.

"I need to know you're not an idiot, to start with."

"You want me to take a test?"

"Why not?" Vesper asked. "You've been given some insight into our political situation, and you claim to know what's at stake. Instead of me telling you about Zara, why don't you tell me?"

"You want me to guess?"

"If you have to guess, Mr Asano, then you aren't playing the game; the game is playing you."

"Fair enough, Princess. I'll play."

He leaned back in his chair, contemplating what he knew. Zara acted on her own because her family would never go along with her choice of plan. That meant the motivation was hers. Just avoiding the concept of an arranged marriage wasn't the answer; her whole culture and the way she was raised would make it normal to her. If it had been some chunky old guy that was one thing but it was a handsome and accomplished young scion. He knew that much from asking around.

"Mr Asano?"

"Give me a moment to think this through. I'm pretty, not smart."

The boy could be a Thadwick, but Zara was the king's eldest daughter. If they had to marry someone to a Thadwick it would be a loose cousin or something. In fact, any problems Zara had with her potential match would be something the family could handle. It

could be that she found someone else, someone inappropriate, but the only viable play there would have been to run off together. It wouldn't take long for her illicit lover to be found and disappeared, which is why she picked someone already dead for her desperate plan. Jason couldn't think of a single good reason for Zara to have done what she did with the political training he was certain she had, which meant...

Jason's eyes went wide.

"It wasn't her fault," he realised. "It was the boy the Irios family put up. She covered for him to take the heat because she's the Hurricane Princess and can make people eat this formal period of mourning nonsense, even if they don't like it. If he'd been the one to call things off, that would get the royal family coming down on the Irios family like a pallet of bricks. If the royal family side is in the wrong, though, that balances out the relative strength of the two families by giving House Irios some political capital. Thus, the state of tension."

Jason got up from his chair and started pacing as he thought it through out loud.

"But why do it like this?" Jason pondered. "It creates a huge mess when they could go to the families and fix everything behind closed doors?"

He paused, face lighting up with realisation.

"Oh, she did a me. She didn't think the people with the actual power would go along, so she made a plan that was loud and bold without thinking through the wider consequences. Announcing this mourning story was too public to just sweep under the rug. Am I right?"

"You are," Vesper said. "What else?"

Jason tapped his head thoughtfully as he resumed pacing.

"Zara makes this big play, the wedding is off and she's in the dog house. But I'm guessing she's daddy's favourite, and people go along as predicted, doing their best to clean up the mess. At least you have this formal mourning period where she has to play good daughter instead of whatever crazy stuff she'd normally get up to, if this debacle is anything to go by. It also gives you a couple of years to smooth things out with House Irios, but they're cranky and the monster surge is already overdue. They're responsible for the Storm Kingdom's defences, which is why you wanted them happy in the first place, and the timing gives them even more political capital. They start pressuring the royal family with this newfound influence because their proud scion getting cuckolded isn't great for the reputation of a proud noble house. How am I doing?"

"Go on," Vesper said.

“Now, we’re closing in on the end of this mourning period and you’ve probably got something lined up. Another marriage, maybe. A match that gives a nice bit of prestige to the Irios family and smooths things over. But then you get a couple of wrinkles. Zara’s deceased paramour rises from the dead and the monster surge finally begins. I have no doubt you considered killing me off, only to realise that I genuinely am a mysterious stranger from another world. There are events you don’t understand at play and you have no idea who is lurking behind the enigmatic silver-ranker who is oddly in the middle of cosmic events. And you have to be careful of whoever’s lurking behind me – wise choice, by the way.”

“I don’t suppose you’d like to share who or what that is?” Liara asked.

“I’m sure it’ll dawn on you eventually,” Jason said. “Anyway, things are going pear-shaped and with fresh eyes on this whole affair, something’s changed. Zara kept her mouth shut, I bet. I’m thinking it’s the Irios kid who cracked, or maybe someone around him, and now both families realise that Zara was taking the heat for the boy the whole time. Suddenly, all the attitude they’ve been throwing at the royal family is coming back to bite them. But you want to smooth things over. It’s the monster surge and helping the Irios family save face gets what you wanted in the first place; a harmonious relationship with an important noble house.”

Jason stopped, frowning as the cogs continued to turn before resuming both the postulation and the pacing.

“The problem is, this whole mess had played out very publicly and you can’t just air it all out. That would make both families look like fools who danced in the palm of a pair of teenagers. She was nineteen when I met her, right? So, you decide to lean into Zara’s original story and paint her as the naïve girl who fell for a stranger in a foreign land. Said stranger makes a shocking reappearance, giving Zara the chance to show that she’s more mature than when she was three years ago. She rebuffs the would-be Lothario, demonstrating that she’s learned from her mistakes and is ready to step up and handle more responsibility. The Irios family magnanimously decides to forgive the indiscretion, for which the royal family is appropriately grateful. All you need is someone who can plausibly sweep a young woman off her feet, is willing to play along and maybe accept one or two dents to his pride. All the better if he’s looking to skip town as soon as the monster surge is over so the whole thing can be left behind.”

Jason dropped back into his chair.

“How did I do?”

“You’re not completely an idiot, then,” Vesper said.

"I do my best, but the occasional bit of competence slips through."

"What you described is broadly accurate. We need to make you appear at least vaguely plausible as a man that could turn the head of an inexperienced girl."

"I'm not going to come out of this looking good, am I?" Jason asked. "My reputation never seems to go quite the way I want, and this might be a new low. But I can do sleazy for you."

"Don't go too over the top," Liara said. "We want to rehabilitate Zara's reputation, not stain it further."

"You want me to play a guy who creeps on teenagers. I think sleazy is unavoidable."

"I saw the two of you together," Vesper said. "You are a guy that creeps on teenagers."

"I was twenty-three and she was nineteen. It wasn't that bad."

She gave him a flat look.

"It wasn't!"

Vesper and Liara shared a glance.

"What about the Irios kid?" Jason asked, hurriedly changing the subject. "He's the start of all this mess, right? Why did he not want to go through with this marriage?"

"You tell me," Vesper said.

"Alright," Jason said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "How old is this kid? Zara's age?"

"A year younger."

"Okay. Sheltered rich boy. Probably not a total tool bag, if you were willing to have Zara marry him. She went to some extreme lengths to look out for him, too, so I'd say they knew each other pretty well. Childhood friends, put together years ago with this marriage in mind?"

Vesper nodded.

"Alright. He's young, horny, yet somehow not on board even though they're close and Zara's so gorgeous that it's kind of insulting to the rest of us. I mean, we have to walk around not being that good looking?"

"Mr Asano."

"Of course you don't think it's a big deal," Jason said, gesturing angrily at Vesper. "Look at you. It's like the god of sexiness made you just to piss people off."

"Perhaps try and stay on topic, Mr Asano?" Liara suggested.

"Yeah, I should have read the room," he said. "You're no better. There's clearly no point complaining to the Rimaros family about not being attractive enough. Which is kind of the point. I know the whole childhood friend thing. Mine looked downright homely

compared to Zara and that girl messed me up. Which tells me that this guy is gayer than a nautically-themed dance troupe called Hot Seamen.”

Vesper and Liara shared a wide-eyed glance.

“That shouldn’t be a problem, though,” Jason said. “They could just have him marry some bloke. The church of Fertility can let people pump out a kid without ever touching one another. They can grow the adorable little sprog in a jar. Most aristocrats do it that way, men or women, right?”

“You’re familiar with the Fertility church’s capabilities?”

“Took a tour, recently. I knew a conversation like this was coming, so I grabbed the chance to learn about how the aristocracy handle baby-making. Turns out that growing them in a vat is actually the norm and you can just staff your house with sexy gardeners or whatever without mum and dad ever talking to one another.”

“It’s not always like that,” Liara said.

“Yeah, but it’s an option, which makes me wonder what the Irios kid’s problem is. He’s a teenager, so a kind of terrible life choice is a safe bet. I’m guessing a boy. Probably too old and way too inappropriate. Musician?”

“Tattoo artist,” Vesper grumbled.

Jason burst out laughing.

“And they stuck you with cleaning up this mess?” he asked. “Oh, you poor woman.”

“Tell me about it.”

“I take it that guy is out of the picture, now?”

“Very,” Vesper said.

“You didn’t kill him, did you?”

“He’s on an airship somewhere over the Great Western ocean right now with a dimensional bag full of money and a very thorough understanding of what happens if he ever comes back to this hemisphere.”

“Fair enough,” Jason said. “I guess we’re ready to go, then. I’m not looking to make things hard for anyone, so I’ll change up the wardrobe and play mysterious outworlder for you. I assume you’ll want to parade me around a little, maybe make some noble girls swoon.”

“Mysterious brooding loner might be a better choice.”

“Sorry, but I’ve just had my silent brooding period; you missed the window. But I’ll see what I can do about dashing and charismatic.”

Vesper let out a resigned sigh.

“The good thing is that no one will expect perfect etiquette,” she said. “You’re not just a commoner and from another country but a whole other world. Adventurers get a lot of leeway if they’re competent, so we need to drum up a conspicuous achievement or two.”

“Thus, the escort from the jobs hall,” Jason said. “You’re looking to make me seem like an important asset to the Builder response unit.”

“You are an important asset to the Builder response unit,” Liara said.

“Which works out. Never lie when the truth can lie for you and don’t do things for just one reason if you can get away with it. Since you’re part of the Builder unit, you can manage my activities, bump up my reputation and be my public contact with the royal family, right?”

“Exactly,” Liara said. “We can also make some judicious leaks from your record. We’ll need your permission for that so the Adventure Society admin doesn’t come down on us.”

“I would have thought you’d just do it without asking their permission, let alone, mine.”

“The Adventure Society doesn’t answer to the royal family,” Liara said. “Neither do you, for that matter.”

“Yet, here I find myself.”

“This business about coming back to life helps us with your reputation,” Vesper said. “How did you come back from the dead? Actually, don’t tell me. Or anyone else. It adds to the mystique. In terms of etiquette, I’m going to give you instruction. Self-made adventurers, especially foreign ones, are held to a different standard. If I’m going to get you into a princess-wooing state, though, you’ll need some polish. You’ll need to know how to eat a meal or participate in a social function without embarrassing yourself. You need to know how to dance.”

“Oh, I can dance, but learning the local steps will be fun. I haven’t been dancing in a while. Too busy being an interdimensional man of mystery. Are you going to show me the moves, Princess?”

“Yes,” Vesper said. “We need to keep this as contained as possible. Your only public contact will be Liara, who will bring you to me at need. For now, we’re going to do a bad job of hiding your value to the Builder response unit. We want people to find you, rather than introducing you ourselves.”

They continued to discuss discussed the details and specifics Jason needed to know. Jason was then sent off in search of a new wardrobe, leaving Liara and Vesper alone. Vesper leaned back wearily in her chair as Jason closed the door behind him.

“This is going to be a huge mess.”

“It always was,” Liara said. “What do you think of him?”

“He’s dangerous, and not in the good way.”

“He seemed to grasp the situation easily enough.”

“Which is exactly the problem. He’s the kind of person who thinks they see through everything. People like that inevitably have a great idea and go off-plan, getting blindsided by the thing they missed or had no way to see coming.”

“Maybe he should marry Zara,” Liara said with a laugh.

“Gods help us all. Do you think you can make people believe he’s some secretly amazing adventurer?”

“That’s the easy part,” Liara said. “Even his unabridged record is full of mysteries, and now we have Asano’s permission to put some of it out there. In social settings, he’ll largely be judged by his aura, which is the opposite of a problem. If anything, that’s what’ll sell this whole story.”

Liara stood up.

“I need to go. This political mess is consuming too much of my time as it is.”

“Drinks tonight?” Vesper asked. “I think we both deserve it.”

“Maybe. I probably won’t have time, but I’ll let you know.”

She went to the door and opened it, pausing before she left.

“What’s a Lothario?” she asked.

“I have no idea.”