

Chapter 531

You Don't Have it in You

With his team needing to assemble for a contract mid-morning, Jason set out early to conduct his own affairs. He portalled to Livaros, arriving in one of the squares marked as legal teleport destinations. Another person followed him through before he closed the portal. She left immediately with no more than a nod to Jason, moving quickly. He set out at a more sedate pace making his way through the streets at a leisurely meander. His destination was Sensual Attire For the Sensual Gentleman, the tailor shop owned by Alejandro Albericci.

Jason had ordered his new wardrobe some time ago but events had engulfed the whole city and Jason in particular. He was a long way from the only one affected by service delays and he didn't begrudge the wait. There were plenty of people in desperate need, making Jason's desire for tropics-appropriate casual wear a low priority.

There was a wariness with which Jason made his way towards the tailor shop. He had already known for some time that Alejandro had closed the shop to provide support services to the city's relief logistics efforts. It had come as something of a surprise, then, to receive a message informing him that his new wardrobe was ready for collection.

Wary of political machinations or worse, Jason had recruited someone to help feel the place out. While he could certainly have blanketed the area in his aura, he wasn't looking to make a spectacle. Instead, he called on someone whose senses were even stronger than his own but operated with more finesse than Jason himself.

After arriving through Jason's portal, Estella Warnock had gone off without a word to scout the route to the tailor shop. She had made a career out of being a spy and urban scout in Livaros and knew the island extremely well. Not just the streets but the back alleys, rooftops and building interiors. Between her stealth and disguise powers, she had been inside all but the most secure buildings on the island, and even a few of those.

Livaros was an island of adventurers and aristocrats; one of the centres of global civilisation. Wealth and power had seeped into the streets and buildings over the centuries, which only the ignorant considered a metaphor. Even the essences and awakening stones that manifested on the island trended towards higher-rarity.

All the influence and power made Livaros an incredibly safe place, for a given value of safe. Violence was effectively absent but, in Livaros, war was not a matter of violence. In the upper echelons of society, along with those they used and those who used them,

politics was the battlefield and information the weapon. To know the needs, desires and fears of a rival was to have a power over them as great as any essence ability.

Estella had thrived in this environment for a number of reasons. Her power set was an obvious part of that, allowing her to vanish into shadows or hide in plain sight. More important was her ability to temper her ambition. She never took the big risk for the big score, sticking to what she knew and what she was certain about accomplishing. To play the information game in Livaros was dangerous and she never gambled, knowing that sooner or later, the dice would not go her way.

This was what led to her falling out with Havi Estos. She had done work for the well-known middleman since shortly after reaching iron-rank. She was of little use at that stage but the potential of her four auras was obvious. Rather than wait for her power to come to fruition, Havi played the long game and invested in her early. Estella had known the reasoning behind his generosity but hadn't minded. He never hid his intentions or sought to exploit her, being upfront with his intentions and always dealing straight.

Her time at bronze rank was the strongest point in their relationship. She had become much more useful to him as experience led to growth in power and expertise. She was often useful to spy on silver-rankers but Havi never pushed her limits, recognising that, as a bronze ranker, she still needed to be cautious. She avoided the more powerful silver-rankers, only spying on those closer to the start of the rank than the end.

It was after she reached silver rank that things started to go sour. Havi wanted to push her into bolder and bolder moves, but while she had grown in power, Livaros was no simple place. While there was no shortage of hopeless aristocrats at silver rank, it was also home to people significantly more dangerous. Rimaros was the pinnacle of the adventuring world and no adventurer of note was ordinary. Even those that seemed normal had methods that set them apart, meaning that to spy on or investigate them was a fraught endeavour.

More than once, Havi sent her to look into the kind of people that she had no business provoking. These were the kinds of people that could make someone like her disappear, even with her grandfather's influence. The gold-ranker had largely retired and had never been a man of exceptional power or influence.

Much like his granddaughter in her profession, Warwick Warnock had always taken a safe and reliable path in his adventuring. It had meant that silver and gold rank had taken him longer than most adventurers, but many more died trying while he climbed the mountain one step at a time. His avoidance of politics meant that while he had the prestige of any gold-ranker, it was no more than that. With Havi pushing Estella towards ever-more-

dangerous enemies, one relatively unheard-of gold ranker was not enough to ensure her safety if things went wrong.

While she didn't regret cutting ties with Havi, it left Estella at something of a loss. While he wasn't the only person she worked for, he was the spider in the middle of the web that was the Livaros underworld. It was a very different kind of underbelly than most cities, requiring a very different approach. Havi wouldn't make things difficult for her, but being on the outs with him made other clients wary. The jobs she was offered swiftly declined both in number and remuneration.

Unsure of what to do, she had finally approached her grandfather, not for help but advice and guidance. The death of her adventurer parents had prompted his retirement to raise her and he had never pushed her to follow in his footsteps, the way he had with his son. Events overcame them, however, as Warwick stepped up in the Storm Kingdom's hour of need. He went north for the grand battle and never returned.

At a loss, she had moved back into her childhood home, the house on Arnote she inherited from her grandfather. She had no friends and few acquaintances, all of which were on Livaros and most of which were avoiding her because of their own need to deal with Havi Estos.

She only really had two acquaintances now, one of which was the mayor of her new home. Pelli was some kind of peripheral royalty who had roped her into helping protect the island, mostly through her grandfather's influence. Estella didn't care about the royal family, being an adventurer or helping people. What she did care about was her grandfather, so when he asked, she agreed.

The other acquaintance was her neighbour, the last person Havi had her investigate. They nodded to one another in passing and had spoken a few times. Asano hadn't known her grandfather long but they had gotten along very well.

When Asano engaged her in a professional capacity, she had no reason to refuse. It was the kind of simple job she had done countless times, watching out for some kind of setup to try and push a political agenda, gather information or gather dirt. It had been a little while so she took her time, being careful and thorough before reporting the all-clear to Asano.

Estella had found Jason and let him know that everything was as it appeared to be, so far as she could determine.

"Thank you," he told her. "Would you like me to portal you home?"

“I’ll stick with you,” she said. “Sometimes a capable schemer will be cautious and wait until someone like me is done before making a move.”

“I appreciate your work ethic,” Jason told her.

They arrived at the front door of Sensual Attire For the Sensual Gentleman where the door was immediately opened by Alejandro Albericci who graciously ushered them inside. The celestine tailor had his sea-green hair tied up in a top knot and his suit was quite dark. This stood out to Jason as he had learned that the tailor very much preferred to operate in lighter tones.

“Thank you for coming, Mr Asano. And, if I’m not mistaken, you are miss Estella Warnock?”

“That’s right,” Estella said.

“Then please allow me to convey my condolences on the passing of your grandfather. He was a man who knew how to find simple satisfaction in a world full of people ever hungry and never satisfied. I admired him a great deal.”

“You knew my grandfather?”

“He was a customer of mine, of my uncle before me and my great uncle before that. I would not go so far as to claim a friendship, but his was a welcome acquaintance to make. If I may ask, young Miss, what brings you to my door today.”

“After my last visit,” Jason said, “I was wary of someone else trying to set up an oh-so-coincidental encounter. I have engaged Miss Warnock to forewarn me.”

“Her reputation in this field is exemplary, so I compliment you on your choice.”

“I was a little surprised to hear from you, Mr Albericci,” Jason said.

“Please, Mr Asano, do call me Al.”

“Alright, Al. I didn’t realise you were still operating.”

“I am not taking new clients,” Alejandro said. “Livaros, for all the turmoil and the terrifying attack, went largely untouched by the recent trouble. Amongst the civilian population and infrastructure, anyway. The adventurers have been tragically devastated and again, Miss Warnock, my heartfelt commiseration for your loss. But given that, I have had at least some time and have been working on my existing commissions. They are being completed later than I would like but completed nonetheless.”

Alejandro had an assistant brew Estella a cup of tea while he took Jason into the workroom for final fitting and adjustments he could make swiftly using his essence abilities.

“For your outfits, I decided to take inspiration from you,” Alejandro explained as he wheeled a mobile rack from a storage room. “You asked for clothes well suited in both function and style to the Sea of Storms and that is where I started. Storm linen, cloud silk,

tidal cotton. Flexible, comfortable, breathable and resistant to the elements, along with the usual enchantments. Plus, a selection of hats as requested.”

Alejandro waved a hand in the direction of Jason's face.

“Your eyes, as I'm sure you're aware, are very striking. When designing your clothes, I had the choice between minimising their impact to avoid clashing or to emphasise them for effect. Naturally, I chose emphasis, since why make a coward's choice for a man of courage and prestige.”

“I'm not that prestigious,” Jason assured him. “I don't know what you've heard but I know some prestigious people; I'm not one of them. If that's the reason you took the time to finish my commission, I'm afraid you'll be disappointed.”

“I meet a lot of powerful people in my profession, Mr Asano. You would be startled by how much I learn from what clothes they walk in here with and what clothes they want to walk out with. I know what a man who clings to the prestige of others looks like, as well as a man who wishes he had none. If I may be so bold, Mr Asano, you think you want to be like Miss Warnock's grandfather but you never will be. You don't have it in you.”

“Is that so?”

“It is, which is why I went ahead and used your remarkable ocular presence as the basis for the emphasis notes in your outfits. Nothing outrageous; your outfits are all in the colours, cuts and fabrics we discussed. I have provided, however, an extensive array of accessories, from cufflinks to handkerchiefs plus hatbands that will draw out the vibrant colours of your eyes.”

“I'm not looking for flashy, Mr... Al.”

“I am well aware, Mr Asano. As I take you through the outfits, what you will see is dignity and style but with just the right amount of pop. Naturally, should you wish to be less overt, there is a selection of more conservative options as well, although I personally hope they go in a draw and never come out.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “I guess you should start taking me through what you've done and we'll see.”

“I'm very confident, Mr Asano. And, of course, I have made sure the speciality outfits you requested are all here. Let's start with something simple, however...”