

Chapter 893

On a Whim

Jason stood in front of the portal. He took a long breath and let it out slowly.

“Here we go.”

He stepped through and emerged in the portal room of Rexion, which had changed quickly in his absence. Previously empty but for one desk staffed by a bored attendant, it was now a combination greeting room and administrative centre. A path ran through the room from the portal to the door, with a half dozen staff now stationed to either side.

In the middle of the room was Marla. The leader of the brightheart military was an arresting visage, with hair and eyes glowing like molten steel. She was no delicate beauty, however, with a powerful warrior’s physique. As the others in the room gawped at Jason, her eyes only widened a little before she schooled her expression back to neutrality.

“You’ve got quite the presence, Mr Asano. Did you eat that mountain shaped like your head?”

Jason chuckled as a smile teased at Marla’s lips. He’d never seen her make a joke before, and for good reason. In the time they’d known each other, they had been fighting for the survival of what was left of her people, in the ashes of their home. Seeing the lightness she had now made him smile. It was a good reminder that the struggles they went through had been worth it.

“I didn’t eat it,” he said. “Not exactly. What warrants a reception from someone as important as yourself?”

“No offence, Mr Asano, but when you show up, it usually leads to things that our administrative staff need to pass up the line.”

“Fair enough. But I have no business with Rexion today, other than finally moving beyond its borders. When your ruling council is done negotiating with the churches, I’ll come along and deal with it. Just ask when you’re ready.”

“Ask who? Will you be leaving a representative? Lorenn thought that might be a good idea.”

“Unnecessary. You don’t need to ask anyone; you just have to ask. I’ll know.”

“That’s a little disconcerting.”

“Give it some thought,” Jason told her. “Then you’ll realise it’s a lot disconcerting.”

He looked around at the staff who were still staring at him like he had three heads. If it was this bad in his domain, it would be worse once he left it, so he concentrated on retracting his presence. It was similar to doing so with his aura, both being expressions of

his soul's power. He saw the result in the faces around him as they became less slack-jawed and pulled themselves together.

"Better?" he asked.

"Better," Marla confirmed.

"This may be more of a problem than I anticipated. Before I'm out and about for the day, I could use somewhere quiet to practise keeping it under wraps."

"I can arrange that. Fiorella?"

After getting no response, she turned to look at one of the staff.

"*Fiorella?*"

"Yes, Commander!" the young woman said, shooting up from her chair. She shook her head and blinked rapidly while standing at military attention.

"See Mr Asano to Ambassador Suite Seven. I believe that one is empty."

Fiorella watched Asano float, cross-legged, in the middle of the room. It had been a well-appointed luxury suite when they arrived, but dissolved into cloud-stuff the moment they entered. It turned into a plain white room, empty but for a luxurious arm chair for Fiorella. Asano had said nothing and immediately floated up to meditate in the middle of the room. She had waited and watched as his arresting presence slowly diminished.

When he'd first emerged from the portal, it was like a bomb went off. The world wasn't literally bending around him, but it had felt like it was. He stood out like someone standing in front of a painted background instead of a real one. It was almost dizzying to look at, and distracting enough that she embarrassed herself in front of the commander.

She had led Asano to the main diplomatic building, where visiting dignitaries were housed and could hold meetings. As they walked, she was building up the courage to ask a question when he spoke first.

"It's good to see you again," Asano told her. "Sorry if I was a little more startling, this time."

"You're always startling," she said, immediately closing her eyes in a blushing wince. He let out a good-natured chuckle.

"Why are you so different?" she asked.

"When I'm out and about like this, I'm using avatars. Puppet bodies. This one holds more of my power than the others, and it tends to leak. I need to practise keeping it under control."

She sat and watched him do exactly that for several hours. When he roused, the room swirled and returned to its original state of well-furnished luxury. He grabbed a fruit

from a bowl on a side table and fell into a chair, looking casual and relaxed. She felt just the opposite, her whole body tense as a tightly clenched fist.

He chatted companionably, asking her questions about the city, the militia and her life living in both. She barely remembered her answers, her mind filled with his alien eyes that seemed to look right through her. He seemed genuinely interested, which surprised her.

By the time he was done, he seemed much as he had in their previous encounter: imposing and powerful, but no more so than any other high ranker. There was still something there, though, that seemed a little off. Something about the way he spoke, like it was reaching into her mind without passing through her ears first. Looking at him, really looking, there was something about him she couldn't place. If she wasn't staring right at him, she doubted she would notice. Then she realised she was staring right at him, in complete silence. He laughed as she felt her face burn with embarrassment.

"How is it?" he asked. "Do you think I can walk around without attracting too much attention?"

"I don't think so, Mr Asano."

"I told you to call me Jason."

"People tell me a lot of things, Mr Asano. I'm not always the best at following orders."

He laughed again, something she was finding he did a lot. It was a little unnerving, like watching a war golem fold laundry.

"Thank you, Fiorella. I think I'm just about ready to get out and about. Thank you for keeping me company."

He stood up and she did the same.

"I can escort you to—"

"I know the way. It was nice seeing you again."

He walked through the wall like it was an illusion. Fiorella walked over and ran her hand over it, finding it completely solid.

Whether visiting or leaving, moving in or out of Rexion was for high-ranking individuals. A massive shaft was the way into and out of the brightheart city, and there were neither elevators nor stairs. It was wide enough that many flying vehicles could move up and down at once, and a handful belonged to the Rexion Transport Authority. Those mostly gathered dust, however. Anyone who could not arrange their own passage was strongly advised to stay where they were.

Traffic in and out of the city went through a transport authority customs station in the cavernous tunnel leading to the shaft. Jason tested his ability to blend in by joining the

queue for exit inspection. The people around him were mostly silver, but he spotted a few golds and some bold bronze rankers. He got a few odd looks, especially from the other golds, but gold rankers always paid attention to one another. To his satisfaction, there was nothing more to it than that.

The transport authority staff were silver-rank brighthearts. Anything less and the high-rankers moving through customs would start pushing around their weight. From what Jason saw, the gold-rankers comported themselves with decorum, not deigning to make an issue of their power.

On the surface, gold-rankers would normally get their own priority access for something like this, if they were subject to it at all. The transit station was still inside Jason's domain, however. Stories still made the rounds about what happened to troublemakers in the early days, and now rumours did much of their work for them.

Reaching the front of his line without incident, Jason encountered an attendant in a security booth of magically reinforced glass. The attendant had silver hair and eyes, like Sophie, denoting a metal-aspect brightheart. She looked slightly bored but alert.

"Documentation, please."

"I'm sorry, but I don't have any."

Her boredom was instantly replaced with professional wariness.

"What happened to it?" she asked.

"I never got any."

"How did you get into the city without paperwork?"

"I, uh, built it."

"You built your paperwork?"

"No, I built the city."

"Who do you think you are, Jason Asano?"

"Yes."

She sighed.

"Sir, please step out of the line and join that queue where they establish your—"

"Bernice," Jason said. "Look at me. Really look."

She did, with a look of suspicion.

"How do you know my name?"

"I know more than your name, Bernice. I've known you for most of your life. When you snuck off to swim in the kelp fields in the water chambers. I knew you when Giram asked you to marry him. When you cried alone on finding out you weren't pregnant, then

cried with your husband when you finally were. He's bit of a blubberer, that husband of yours."

"I don't know what game you're—"

"Look at me, Bernice."

"You are not going to—"

Look at me.

Bernice's eyes went wide and Jason gave her an apologetic smile.

"Sorry to be forceful," he said. "I probably should have just skipped the line, but I wanted to check something. Were you warned I might be coming?"

She gave a jerking, nervous nod.

"We were all talking about it, but we didn't think..."

Jason chuckled.

"Not everyone thought I was real."

"No."

Jason held out his thumb and forefinger and created a gold spirit coin between them. He imprinted his aura on it and tossed it to Bernice, who almost dropped it.

"Now," Jason told her, "you have something to show Herk next time he runs his mouth in the break room."

Bernice stared at the coin sitting in her hand, as if unsure it was real.

"Can I go, then?" Jason asked. "I don't want to hold up the line."

Bernice shook her head, as if waking up from a trance. She looked at the line behind Jason, who didn't seem to have noticed her borderline-religious experience.

"Uh, no," she said.

"What?"

"I mean, a magic coin is great and all, but if I start letting people through with something like that, I'm going to get fired. If you don't have papers, you need to join that queue back there and get new ones."

Jason turned and look at the slow-moving queue.

"Seriously?"

She shrugged apologetically.

"Unless you want to force your way past," she said. "If you're really who you say you are, that shouldn't be hard."

Jason let out a groan.

"It was nice meeting you, Bernice."

He left the line and trudged over to the other queue. He could have easily circumvented the whole process, either with magic or by calling in a high-ranking bureaucrat. That would only cause problems for Bernice, however. He chided himself on getting other people caught up in things he did on a whim.

“And what did she do?” Marla asked as Fiorella gave her report.

“She made him go get his papers because he didn’t have any.”

“How did she do that?”

“By telling him to, so far as I can tell.”

“And he did it?”

“It would seem so, Commander. He didn’t jump the queue, either. Waited more than half an hour.”

“Anyone other than...”

Marla picked up the personnel file on her desk and looked it over again.

“...Bernice notice anything about him?”

“No, Commander. From what I was able to tell, he stood out no more than any other gold ranker.”

“He adapts fast,” Marla mused.

“Isn’t that a good thing?” Fiorella asked. “Isn’t that why we’re all in this city instead of the ruins of the one that used to stand here?”

“Yes,” Marla said. “But there’s danger in someone with the power of a god and the thinking of mortal.”

“Does he really have the power of a god?”

“In this city he does.”

She once more glanced over the file in her hands.

“Get me some more information on this Bernice. If she can handle Asano, I think she might be wasted where she is. Let’s look into getting her a promotion.”

The difficulties in navigating the shaft reinforced that this was not a place for low rankers. There was no illumination attached to the shaft itself, although the heavy traffic was a stream of lights moving up and down. Jason reflected that it looked like a busy highway at night. Most of the traffic was made up of flying trade barges, but there was no shortage of multi-person skimmers and personal transport devices, all shedding light of various colours. Some people, like Jason himself, simply flew without visible aid.

Jason wanted to pause as he reached the threshold of his domain's power, but it would have held up traffic. As such, his first departure from his domain in years was an unceremonious thing. His power was harder to hide once he left, drawing a few nearby gazes, but he quickly got it under control. He wasn't the only one to demonstrate an unsettled aura passing in or out of his domain, so he didn't stand out too much.

It was just outside of his domain that Jason found the border town that had built up at the outskirts of Rexion, dug into the walls of the shaft. It was managed by the brighthearts but had a mostly transient population of surface dwellers. It began as a small outpost, founded back in the transformation zone months. Years later it was a massive town ringing the shaft.

Nothing was left of the original uncut walls. The natural stone had been carved out, leaving something like a subterranean Las Vegas ringed around the shaft. Magical signs and decorations washed everything in a mishmash of cyberpunk neon. A few establishments ran right up to the edge with massive viewing windows, but most of the space near the shaft was taken up by entertainment and shopping plazas. A few tunnels led deeper into the town, away from prime shaft-side areas too expensive for warehousing.

The landing platforms were differentiated by usage. Large ones led to access tunnels that could accommodate the trade barges. Smaller ones fed visitors into the plazas lined with taverns, shops and gambling halls. Jason overheard someone call the area The Ring.

Jason grinned as he floated towards a landing platform for individual travellers. In his domains, he saw everything. He didn't consciously process it, but if he wanted to watch something that happened in some corner of Rexion seven years ago, the memory danced up from the back of his mind. But this place was outside of his domain, offering all new experiences to explore.

As he walked through the plaza with people bustling around him, he extended his senses through the town. He was gentle and delicate, to the point that most gold rankers wouldn't notice, and various places in the town were shielded against such perception. Not enough to stop a gold ranker, but enough that it would be rude and obvious if he pushed through to take a peek. What he did sense was an aura that was familiar, even though it was now gold rank instead of silver, and he headed in that direction.