

## 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."

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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.

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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.

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“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.”

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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.

## Chapter 894

### Mandatory Team Activity

The subterranean border town of Outer Rexion was a ring of lights in the dark. Accommodation anywhere but the back tunnels was expensive by most standards, but gold rank adventurers had standards all of their own. Zara Nareen entered her suite and immediately spotted something different from when she left it. Someone had been in her room, despite explicit instructions to the contrary.

It was a multi-room suite, centred on two chairs and a couch set around a low table. There was something new on the table, but she didn't concentrate on that for the moment. Distracting her could easily be the plan, setting her up for an attack from behind. Instead, she pushed her magical perception out hard, in clear disregard of propriety.

She sensed no one else in the suite. She felt the agitation of those in the nearby rooms, but they were suppressing their anger. Social norms were all well and good, but no one wanted to bang on the gold-ranker's door and tell them to stop making a magical racket.

Zara took slow steps forward, looking around. If she couldn't sense anyone, either no one was there or the person there was very dangerous. She moved to the coffee table for a closer look at what had been left on it: a plate of red and white baked squares. Her shoulders slumped as the tension left her body. She smiled at a memory from half her lifetime ago.

"All these years and you're still barging in uninvited."

"I think 'barged' is a little harsh," Jason said as he stepped out of a corner shadow that should not have been able to hide a person. He shrugged off his cloak and it dissolved into nothing. Zara shook her head, picked up one of the slices and delicately bit off a corner. Then she elegantly lowered herself into an armchair as Jason dropped himself into the other like a sack of potatoes.

"I'm a little surprised you're the first one here," Jason told her. "I'm also a little surprised you're still turning your hair and eyes copper."

A contrite expression crossed his face.

"I had no right to tell you what to do with your body, even if my anger was justified. I'm sorry for that."

"We both made some bad choices back then. And you would have had to make fewer of them if I hadn't dragged you into my mess."



“Those are old stories, and these are new times,” Jason said. “Perhaps it’s time to let all that go. And it does look good on you, although I suspect most things do.”

“Are you flirting with me, Jason?”

“No, I just have eyes. Why are you still wearing a different colour?”

“The sapphire hair is iconic to the royal family. I’m still adopted into House Nareen, and it makes things easier.”

“Still publicly on the outs with the royal family?”

“No. Politics is more changeable than the sea and there has been plenty of time for that to blow over. But I like being part of my mother’s family, and staying there keeps me out of the worst of it. Especially since my cousin became the new Storm King. And my father has become softer since retirement. I was spending time with him in Rimaros when I was sent word you were back. That’s why I’m the first one here.”

They sat back in their armchairs, looking one another over. Neither of them had aged, of course. Zara knew that ranking up had changed little about her appearance, but Jason was a different story. His face had already changed a lot at silver rank, but his strange, nebulous eyes always drew the attention. Now he had the same eyes he had when they met at iron rank; dark, challenging and playful.

“Have your eyes changed back, or are they a disguise, like mine?”

“Just a disguise. How effective it will be, I’m not sure. I’m having trouble containing myself.”

“You always did.”

He flashed that infuriating impish grin. He was more handsome than when they’d met, yet still somewhat plain by gold rank standards. His chin was still somehow too prominent after ranking up no less than four times. It left his face oddly out of balance, yet it suited him perfectly. He always had a way of leaving her off balance as well.

More profound than the physical changes was the way his mental state affected his physicality. Back then he’d been twitchy, wild and energetic, as if he were hopped up on something. His body language was like a rabbit hopping on the spot, unsure whether to play or run away.

Now he was still. Certain. He looked at the world as if, whatever he decided, it was the world that would have to answer. Not many people recognised that look. Most never met a diamond ranker, let alone enough to know that they all had it. Zara was one of the few who did.

“Where did you get the ingredients?” she asked.

“The ingredients?”

“For the gem berry milk nut squares. We’re so far underground that the rock around us would be molten if not for the natural array,” she said. “The bronze rankers here have to wear specialised magic items just to survive.”

“I’m aware.”

“And you’ve been down here for what? A decade and a half?”

“About that.”

“So, where did you get gem berries and milk nuts to make this slice?”

She took another bite, then spoke with her mouth full in distinctly unladylike fashion.

“It tastes exactly the same!”

“That’s because it’s the same batch,” he told her.

She swallowed it all in a gulp, not carefully chewing as she had before.

“You fed me twenty-year-old baked goods?”

He reached for the plate.

“If you don’t want it…”

Jason’s hand was slapped away by a concentrated burst of compressed air that didn’t disturb anything else in the room. He leaned back, his grin somehow becoming even more smug.

“That was some precise wind control.”

“I did do a little practise on the way to gold rank, you know. I hate to break it to you, but time moves on while you’re off having cosmic adventures. The rest of us are living lives.”

She barely caught the flash of sadness before he reached out for the plate again. He took a slice and stuffed half of it in his mouth, waggling his eyebrows at her. But the mask had slipped a little, and didn’t quite fit anymore.

“It must be strange for you,” she said. “You go off and do these amazing things. Walking between worlds. But then you come back and everything has changed on you. Missing the lives of friends. Some girl you met once used your name, landing you in the middle of a political tangle you neither asked for nor deserved.”

“Why did you?” he asked. “I never cared to ask, back then, but why me? Like you said, we only ever met a few times. I’ll grant you, that first time it was memorable, but I was no one back then.”

“Do you really want me to answer that?”

“Should I?”

“No. I complicated things for you the last time you came back. I hope I’ve managed to learn better in all this time.”

She sighed and set her half-eaten slice down on the plate before leaning back and staring at Jason.

“You know I’ve been working with the team in your absence.”

“No you haven’t.”

Her eyebrows rose.

“You haven’t been working with the team, Zara; you’ve been in it. You’ve spent more time working with them than I have, even having scattered since reaching gold rank. You’re as much a part of the group as I am. Maybe even more so.”

Zara took a long breath and let it out slowly as she stared at Jason.

“It took me a long time to feel like I belonged,” she said. “Once I did, I felt an insecurity that maybe it was just in my head. That you would come back and kick me out. I asked to join you once before, and I know the circumstances were different, but I remember how angry you were. The way you looked at me.”

“I wasn’t angry at you, Zara. I was just angry.”

“It felt like you were angry at me.”

“Yeah, well, maybe a bit.”

“I don’t think I ever let go of that fear, not entirely. The way things ended with my last team...”

“Do you mind if I ask about them?”

“Rose retired. She works for the Adventure Society now. Orin is still adventuring. Hit gold rank not that long ago. He’s in a team with Kasper Irios and his friends. He’s—”

“The friend you invoked my name for so he didn’t get stuck marrying you.”

“Yes. Not my finest hour. It turns out my father was already working to... it doesn’t matter. Kasper is an adventurer, now, and Orin is the only one on his team to hit gold so far.”

“Amos Pensinata’s influence?”

“I don’t know. No one’s really seen him since the transformation zone. He was around for a little while, settling the affairs of Orin’s team. Then he just kind of vanished. Some people say he retired, others that he’s working on getting to diamond rank. He clearly wants to be left alone, so I never dug deeper.”

She sighed.

“I still think about my old team a lot. I wasn’t with them for all that long, but it felt like I was building a place to belong. They were a Rimaros team who trained the same way I did. We thought the same, tactically and strategically. It was different with your team.”

“*Our* team.”

“Our team. Thank you. They were still figuring things out when Sophie recruited me. Losing you, Taika and Rufus all at once left massive gaps in their tactical options. I felt like a stranger trying to fill three holes when I didn’t fit in any of them. They didn’t seem worried because the way they work is so adaptable, but that’s not the way we train in Rimaros. For a long time, I thought I’d made a mistake.”

“But not now.”

“No. When Sophie pulled me in, I felt bereft of purpose. She told me there are worse things you can dedicate a life to than helping people. It’s strange how you can dismiss an idea for seeming so simple and obvious. I’d convinced myself that I had to find something complicated and unexpected to set me on my life path. It’s why I went chasing you.”

“Just that?”

“I’ll ask again: do you really want me to answer that?”

“No,” he said. “Not today. Do you know when the others will get here?”

“Should be in the next few days. Travis will be soon, as he’s still working out of Rimaros. He’s been doing cloud flask research with House de Varco and that diamond ranker who hates you. The others are farther away, mostly Vitesse. Last I heard, Neil was in the Mirror Kingdom with Nik.”

Zara was startled at the smile that lit up Jason’s face.

“How’s my little rabbit guy doing? He must have found a team by now, right?”

“Actually, he’s been working with the Adventure Society. They shop him out for expeditions that could use a communications and coordination specialist. He’s in very high demand, from what I’ve heard.”

“That diamond ranker is going to come here, aren’t they?”

“I suspect so. They didn’t like you dodging them for fifteen years.”

“Are you using non-binary pronouns or did this diamond ranker split themselves into multiple people with magic?”

“Pronouns. High-ranking shape-shifters often switch around their gender. Travis introduced the concept of chosen pronouns and it’s catching on amongst gold and diamond rankers. Apparently. I don’t talk to that many diamond rankers.”

“See, this is favouritism. Knowledge wouldn’t let me go around disseminating ideas from Earth.”

“Only ones you didn’t understand for yourself. You introduced several concepts related to cooking that I did not impede at all.”

Zara looked around the room and saw nothing, but sensed a barely discernible divine aura. She looked to Jason, whose attempt at looking cranky was plainly undercut with amusement.

“Oh, look at this,” he complained to the room. “I’m out of my domain five minutes and already you’re eavesdropping.”

“Are you saying you never used your omniscience within your domain?” Knowledge asked.

“Yeah, well... shut up.”

After some disembodied laughter, the divine aura vanished. Zara stared as he shook his head in amusement, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

“Does that happen often?” she asked.

“You mean gods having a chat?”

“Yes.”

“I dunno. How much is often? I’m in the club now, so I imagine it’ll keep happening.”

“The club?”

“My membership is a bit odd. I’m not a god, obviously, but I’m not entirely... not a god, either.”

“You’re a demigod?”

“It’s more complicated than that. You want to see?”

“See what?”

He didn’t move. He stayed sitting where he was, eyes locked on her. His dark eyes gave way to the orange and blue ones, but there was no other visible change. At the same time, she felt the change, and she instinctively pushed back in her chair. Like a god’s aura, it was vast and connected to some distant force. It was as if he had become an unstable portal to some place of incomprehensible power.

And as suddenly as the sensation appeared, it vanished.

“What are you?” she asked breathlessly.

“Complicated. I’ll save the big explanations for when we’re all together. I’ll probably need Clive’s help explaining certain parts anyway.”

“Things are going to get strange, aren’t they?”

“Strange how?” Jason asked with unconvincing innocence.

“You know the Magic Society and Adventure Society are going to be all over you about this System thing.”

“I’m more worried about Clive, to be honest. How excited was he when it happened?”

“It’s probably best you don’t know.”

“That bad, huh?”

“I’m sure he won’t make a big deal of it,” Zara lied.

“I’d run off to the other universe without him, but I’ll need him to set that up.”

“The other universe. Where you’re from.”

“Yeah. I’ll be heading over there in not too long. You’re coming, right?”

“Can I?”

“Honestly, it’s probably not up to you. I’m guessing Hump will make it a mandatory team activity.”

## Chapter 895

### Try Not to Bring Down Civilisation

Outer Rexion had many temples, but they weren't clustered together, as was the norm. With the town itself circling a massive shaft, the temple district likewise took the form of a ring. Positioned just behind the shaft-side plazas and entertainment districts, the houses of the holy were conveniently located for post-sin repentance.

What the locals called the Worship Ring was a wide boulevard. The cavernous ceiling accommodated the often exotic architecture of the temples, lining both sides of the broad street. Around each temple were annexes, stalls and shop fronts. Ritual supplies, holy books and iconography were all available, along with more specific products.

In defiance of geology and physics, underground rivers fed the growth chambers that produced all the food and water for Rexion. Accordingly, there was a small temple to the god of rivers in Outer Rexion, abutted by the world's least successful fishing supply shop.

Jason walked around the Worship Ring, down the wide and busy boulevard. He immediately recognised how much prime real estate had been allocated to the churches. He suspected the brighthearts had been generous when expanding the original outpost, since no temples could be built in Rexion proper.

The original brightheart city had its own temples and priesthoods, devoted to the same gods the surface dwellers worshipped. Those temples were long buried and the clergy long dead. The domains of the gods had been overrun by the Undeath priesthood, following the spiritual rules of holy war. It was something Jason understood himself; an instinctive knowledge that came from possessing domains himself.

Domains were, ordinarily, inviolable. A god could not move in on another god's territory, but their followers could. The first step was for the mortal servants of one god to conquer the territory around the spiritual domain of another. With sufficiently thorough control of the area around the domain, they could then invade it to claim for their own god.

Just as Undeath had claimed the site of the old city, so did Jason in resolving the transformation zone. The priests were eradicated, along with the god's power, embodied in the avatar. When Jason conquered the transformation zone, there was no one and nothing left to contest the ground.

As he made his way around the Worship Ring, he brushed against the domains of the various gods. It was a strange and complicated sensation, something between a handshake, a warning and a dating profile. He stopped in front of the temple of Hero,

where a sculpture stood in the middle of the boulevard. An edifice of bronze, silver and gold, with a lot of dark iron, people had to navigate around it to continue along their way.

The sculpture depicted a leonid figure. Fierce and menacing, it radiated power. The golden mane shone faintly with light and the dark armour glowed where the plates met. Jason could feel heat radiating from it. He wasn't sure how long he stood staring as the street traffic flowed past. He was stirred from his reverie by a voice right beside him.

"He wasn't like that. Angry and violent. He could be, yes, but only when he had to. So often are we only remembered for that which we didn't want to do in the first place."

Jason turned to see a man that looked to be in his mid-forties, but his silver rank meant that the real number would be much higher.

"You met him?" Jason asked.

"I once had the privilege. Quite a few years ago, now, on the other side of the world. But I have researched him quite extensively."

"Vitesse?"

"Greenstone," the man said with a smile. "You're him, aren't you?"

Jason took a closer look at the man. He wore simple coloured robes, like a priest of one of the more humble gods. Similar to those of the Healer, but without markings and a light sandy colour, rather than brown.

"You're one of them, aren't you?" Jason asked. "The former priests."

"We like to think of ourselves as seekers of purpose. But yes, Lord Asano. I am."

"Don't call me Lord."

"But that is what you—"

"I know what I am."

"Then what should we call you?"

"My name is Jason. If you insist on being formal, Mr Asano will do."

"Many of us are here, waiting for your return. We keep watch on this sculpture, knowing that you would come. We have been waiting for so long. For your guidance. And our purpose."

"Everyone seeks purpose. I'm not your messiah."

"Aren't you? We have studied your ways. Your nature. Your companions. You walk with gods and travel beyond reality. What was once yours alone you have gifted to every essence user. If you are not a god walking amongst us, you are akin to one. Do you even realise how your voice resonates in my mind like a song of the heavens?"

Jason muffled a groan.



“If you want someone to worship, look around. There are literally temples in every direction. There’s a reason I don’t have one.”

“But you do. Rexion is your temple.”

“No, it isn’t. It’s a home for a people who were almost wiped out. It belongs to them.”

“But your power—”

“Is irrelevant. You want me to be a god? If I hear about any of you proclaiming Rexion to be a temple or otherwise causing trouble for the brighthearts, then you will see my wrath.”

“Please do not be angry, Lo—”

“You’re not going to listen, are you? It’s been almost twenty years. Even if you had nothing left when I set you free, that’s enough time to build a life all over again. To find a purpose, or to make one for yourselves. I know a lot of you have. But the ones like you, you’ve spent it waiting for me to set you on some ill-defined path. And it’s not even me you’re waiting for? If you’ve been at it this long, you’ve built up some idea of me and convinced yourselves it will solve all your problems. That no one else can. I’ve seen where that leads, on the world I come from. But I’ll never be the person you’re imagining. No one can be.”

Jason threw out his arms, gesturing at the temples around them.

“That guidance you’re looking for? That purpose? That is what gods do. If none of them can fill the hole inside you, I certainly can’t.”

“Gods have failed us. You walk on the ground, yet possess their divinity. Not distant and heartless. You know what it is to struggle with the rest of us.”

“That doesn’t make me responsible for you. I’m the guy that saved you a long time ago. I will accept your gratitude, but you’re wasting the time you’ve gotten back. I’m not your path. You have to find your own.”

“We venerate you.”

“Don’t.”

Jason shook his head. He’d used his aura as a privacy shield, but he could sense the people watching them from a distance. More like this man. Their emotions were singular and driven. Obsessive. None of his words had put so much as a dent in the feelings of the man in front of him. He was hanging on Jason’s every word yet hearing none of them.

He looked up at the Gary sculpture, angry more than anything at being interrupted. There was no point wasting any more words on the man so he didn’t, vanishing into the sculpture’s shadow. He emerged somewhere he really didn’t want to be, but needed to.

The temple was one of the more unusual ones, being a tower shaped like an arm jutting up from the ground. Clenched in the hand at the top was a head glaring imperiously down on the passers by. Jason glared back up at it.

“Really?” he asked.

“It’s religion,” Dominion said, appearing next to Jason. “Showmanship is part of the deal.”

None of the passers-by seemed to notice the god.

“I didn’t handle that situation very well,” Jason said.

“There isn’t a good way to deal with that kind. Unless you want to kill them all.”

“No.”

“Then, sooner or later, there’s going to be a cult.”

“I think...”

Jason trailed off, then let out a sigh.

“I think I’m going to need some guidance. I’m not ready for what the power I have now will mean to people.”

“Yeah, you’re going to mess some things up. That’s nothing new, but the scale you’ll be doing it on is. You could do some real damage, now.”

“Yeah,” Jason agreed, his voice resigned. “I was hoping you had some advice.”

“Have you considered giant banners with your face on them?”

“That’s your advice?”

“This is how you ask for it? You know you’re terrible at praying, right? Rocking up to a temple and glaring at it like it owes you money.”

“That’s... not entirely unfair,” Jason conceded.

He turned to look at Dominion standing beside him.

“Do you actually rule anything?” Jason asked.

“My clergy knows damn well to follow orders.”

“But that’s it, right?”

“I am not a ruler, Jason. Kings and emperors rule. Caliphs and prime ministers and greater district regional distribution managers. They rule; I am the very concept of ruling. I am not a hegemon but hegemony itself.”

Jason thought on Dominion’s words while looking up at the menacing temple visage.

“Showmanship is part of the deal,” he said. “I was once told that you are the one that decides who rules and who serves. But that wasn’t right, was it?”

“No. There is no divine right of kings. Mortals choose and I try to help them not make a *complete* mess of things.”

“That former priest was right, wasn’t he? I’m not just some guy. I can’t be, anymore.”

“Not when they know who you are. But you don’t have to let them. I wander around all the time and no one has a clue.”

“I don’t suppose you have some tips on hiding all that power? I can do it well enough when I concentrate, but it’s like trying to hold in a poo. The moment things get exciting it’s going to pop out, whether I like it or not.”

“I can help you with that.”

Dominion casually held out a fist-sized orb. Inside, sparks of blue, silver and gold danced around one another. Jason reached out to accept it.

---

Item: [Projection Command: Presence] (transcendent rank, legendary)

*The authority to control the presence of an expression of transcendent power.*  
(consumable, magic core).

- Effect: Gain control over the presence of your transcendent power, denying mortals the power to perceive it.
- Uses remaining: 1/1

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“Thank you,” Jason said as he absorbed it into his inventory for later.

“You realise it’s only a stop-gap measure. A way to hide yourself while you get a handle on interacting with the mortal world. You will need to get a handle on that if you don’t want to be a god of chaos.”

“Still not a god.”

“Is there really a difference?”

“Well, someday this planet will die and you gods with it.”

Dominion let out a wincing chuckle.

“That’s a horrible thing to say.”

“Sorry.”

“Also, I know you’re new to operating on a god level, but we tend to avoid the word ‘poo.’ It doesn’t convey the dignity we’re going for.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Why did you really come here, Jason? You didn’t need me to tell you that there’s nothing you can do about your would-be followers. The Adventure Society is watching them, as are several churches, including mine. Even you aren’t oblivious enough to not have guessed that.”

“What do you mean, even me?”

“I said what I said. Why did you come to see me, Jason?”

Jason grimaced, not answering immediately.

“On Pallimustus, I’m not an outlier. This prime avatar is just gold rank. If I try going rampant, there are forces that will spank me for it. I’ve gotten away with a lot by being too important to someone or other to just get snuffed out, but I’m immortal now. It’s easy enough to kill my avatar and give me a quarter-century time out.”

“Ah. Your concern is the realm of your birth. The relative power you will have there.”

“Yes. I don’t know if there’s anyone on Earth stronger than I am now. Boris, probably. Maybe Rufus. But that only makes it worse. It’ll be me and all my friends. We could probably conquer the world for a Sunday Fun Day. Just the possibility of that is going to get people making drastic choices.”

“Yes. Enough personal power makes you a political power, whether you like it or not. Every high ranker has to learn that lesson, but you’re not practising with wooden swords, are you?”

“No. And it’s going to be so much worse on Earth. Here, the cultures have adapted to individuals with so much power. Over there, power has always been collective. There have always been those who concentrated that power, but there were limits. They always needed people to make it work.”

“As I see it, you have two choices. Conquer your world, or stand apart from it. Above it. Like a god. You have to rule them, or make them realise that you are so far above them that you have no interest in their little games. Anything in between and it will be chaos.”

“No half measures.”

“No half measures,” Dominion agreed. “When you act — however you act — it must be definitive. Beyond challenge. And when you refrain from acting, you must be beyond question.”

“How can I be beyond question? There will always be those who doubt and disagree.”

“When I say beyond question, I do not mean a questions of morals or values but of power. Make them see that they are nothing before you. That when you choose action, they cannot stop you. That when you choose inaction, they cannot compel you. Whether you are their ruler or their god, to see you, they must always look up.”

“Might makes right.”

“Yes. You don’t like it, I know, but it is the reality. Civilisation is built on not just ideals, but the power to enforce them. And there are always hands in which that power

disproportionately rests. The moment you arrive on Earth, those hands will be yours. So, try not to bring down civilisation.”

“Thanks.”

Dominion grinned.

“You didn’t come to me for easy answers.”

“It would have been nice, though.”

“Wouldn’t it just. Speaking of power, though, there’s some knowledge that Knowledge might not want you to know.”

“And what’s that?”

“She can peek into the head of your prime avatar, but not your true self. The living universe.”

“My consciousness is seated in the prime avatar. Isn’t that the same thing?”

“No. You can keep things from your avatar, if you don’t want them disseminated amongst the gods. Knowledge can be such a gossip.”

“By which you mean the goddess of Knowledge likes to spread knowledge.”

“It was more fun the way I said it.”

Jason gave Dominion a curious look.

“No one has ever said that to me before. Can you teach me to hide things from my avatar?”

“Someone is already lined up for that. For now, just enjoy yourself. Your friends are about to start arriving.”

## Chapter 896

### We Have Forever

Trading with Rexion, even Outer Rexion, came with many complications. Both natural and magical environmental conditions outright killed people unless they were brighthearts or at least silver rank. The effects of the natural array inside Rexion were not as severe as when the array was rendered unstable by the messengers, twenty years earlier. It was still enough to cause problems for the weak and ill-prepared.

The ambient magic interfered with many forms of elemental magic and was hostile to extremely high rankers. Diamond rankers and many at the peak of gold found themselves suffering headaches and vertigo. It wasn't enough to impede their formidable prowess, but it was highly unpleasant. There were also monsters. Most had learned to avoid the shaft, but some were freshly spawned and didn't know better. Others were just too stupid to care. As a result, those heading up or down the shaft needed protection, or the power to protect themselves.

Because of the difficulties involved, guards nor manual labour could be found cheaply. Many turned to repurposed labour constructs, widely available after the reconstruction of Yaresh. While most merchants wanted them, the initial outlay was high. They were also expensive to repair, and not designed for combat. As a result, silver rankers filled the gaps.

Many silver rankers were craftspeople looking to fund their work, or noble scions cut off from the family purse. For those unwilling to adventure, or sign contracts that would tie them up as noble family guards for years, there were limited opportunities to make money. While working the shaft didn't pay as well as adventuring, all it took was a desire for money and a willingness to suffer some indignity.

That indignity often proved the sticking point that made silver rank labour a problem. Used to running a workshop or being served on by others, fighting and hauling goods was something they felt was below them. For some, it became a valuable lesson in humility. In others, it brought their sense of entitlement to the fore. Needing to prove they were more than just thugs and labourers, they started throwing their weight around.

The brighthearts controlled Outer Rexion and the town at the top of the shaft, but the Adventure Society managed traffic moving up and down. The high-level society officials, up on the surface, considered this an excellent opportunity to track who came and went. The people actually doing the work considered the Office of Shaft Traffic Control one of the worst assignments available.

Being a shaft traffic controller was a complex, frustrating and occasionally dangerous job. Frustrated, entitled silver rankers always thought that their business was the most important, and they were the worst done by. When things inevitably went wrong, they grew volatile. The Adventure Society maintained a security force, but they were sometimes slow to act. It didn't help that the security force itself was a punishment duty for recalcitrant adventurers.

The society was at least wise enough to not put malcontent adventurers in charge of anything. A cadre of society officials held the positions of authority, charged with keeping the security force itself in line. These were not coveted roles.

Miguel Ladiv had once foolishly imagined that a cushy job in the Adventure Society would be his for the taking. After all, his uncle was deputy director of the Adventure Society branch in Rimaros. He had seemed so welcoming, too, when Miguel said he wanted to follow him into society. Unfortunately, Uncle Vidal's enthusiasm for nepotism proved to be of the 'chance to prove yourself' variety. Before he knew what had happened, Miguel found himself deep underground, in charge of a cycling array of malcontent adventurers.

"Adventurers have to deal with monsters," Vidal had told him. "Adventure Society officials have to deal with adventurers, which is worse. I'm not going to lie to you; this job will be awful. You may get beaten up and you'll definitely want to quit. But if you do the job, and do it well, you'll be setting yourself up for big things. For one thing, you're going to show the people that matter that you're not taking the easy way."

"Okay, Uncle, hear me out: what if we try doing things the easy way so they think I'm innovative and willing to do the unexpected?"

"The easy way is *always* expected, Miguel. Now, the other thing this job will do is let you run into some big names. A lot of important officials, diplomats and adventurers come through here."

"You want me to suck up to famous adventurers?"

"No, that will just backfire on you. But people like that pay attention to what's going on around them. They wouldn't have lived that long if they didn't. If they see you doing your job well now, they'll remember that down the line. Getting into the top levels of the Adventure Society is a game of politics. Some day, a big adventurer who knows your face, and that you're diligent and capable, will open doors that all the hard work in the world will not."

His uncle had been right, of course. Miguel had definitely wanted to quit. He'd wanted an easy life, and this was anything but. To his surprise, he never quite did. He wasn't heir

to the family title, like his uncle, but he still had his pride. For five years now, he'd been wrangling idiot adventurers to keep order over idiot non-adventurers. He was astounded there hadn't been some kind of blood bath between entitled merchant guards and his idiot adventurers.

He'd also seen some of those big names his uncle had mentioned. Members of famous teams like Moon's Edge and Biscuit. Even the Yaresh diamond rankers, Allayeth and Charist, although that was rare. The natural array made diamond-rankers uncomfortable, though, so visitors that prestigious were rare.

Today was scheduled to be one of those rare days. The famous treasure hunter, Emir Bahadir was going to arrive. With him would be the inventor of the sky link communication tablets, along with a diamond ranker Miguel had never heard of. They would be arriving down the shaft as portals were extremely unreliable this close to Rexion proper. Even so, there was a small portal arrival area, tucked behind Miguel's office.

Miguel's security office was right on the edge of the shaft, abutting the largest of the Outer Rexion's landing platforms. It was a curved quarter-dome of glass, opaque from the outside but allowing him to watch the shaft traffic from within. He knew the VIPs were arriving when he saw a large cloud vessel moving down.

Cloud constructs were popular vehicles, but were notoriously unstable in the depths. They were also small, for personal use. Scaling the size up sent the price soaring, making other designs more viable. This vehicle was an oversized cloud carriage, able to hold a dozen or more in comfort. That made it too pricy for any but the larger noble houses, merchant barons or high-ranking adventurers.

Miguel had some paperwork with the details of the visitors on it. He grabbed the folder and headed outside, meandering across the landing platform. A half-dozen bureaucrats from the Office of Shaft Traffic Control rushed past him, scrambling to meet the visitors.

The cloud carriage reached the platform and was waved into position by the landing guide's signal flags. The vehicle was much too large for the four people who emerged. As they disembarked, the vehicle dissolved and was drawn into a locket around the neck of one of the four passengers.

Miguel was certain that person was the diamond ranker, who went by Cloudweaver. It was unclear if he should address them as Cloudweaver or *the* Cloudweaver. Taking on such names had been common amongst high rankers for a long time. The non-gendered pronouns the paperwork warned him to use were new, but likewise a high-rank trend. It was unusual, but he had encountered them before in the course of his job.



Despite their rank, Cloudweaver was visibly unremarkable. They looked like a woman to Miguel, albeit with short hair and a face that was boyish, but delicate and pretty. He couldn't sense an aura, but there was something about their presence that stood out. It was as if they were painted in vibrant colours while everyone else was washed out.

Of the two men, the taller was the most striking of the group. Impeccably dressed, handsome and black as midnight, he had rainbow beads woven into his hair. He was emitting a polite amount of aura, advertising his gold rank. That was clearly the treasure hunter. The woman next to him, also gold rank, was his wife. Her hair was long, dark and straight, so shiny it reflected the colourful lights of the nearby plaza. She panned over everything with a sharp gaze, Miguel flushing as she paused on him for a moment.

The last member of the group had pale skin and a slightly nervous look about him. At silver, he was the lowest rank of the group and didn't look comfortable in his long coat, shifting as if unused to wearing it. His neck craned as he looked around like a country boy on his first trip to the city.

The Adventure Society officials were attempting to greet the group, with mixed success. Emir Bahadir and — Miguel checked his paperwork — Travis Noble were chatting with each other, ignoring the officials. The diamond ranker looked angry and annoyed as they rubbed at their temples.

Technically, Miguel's job was to stop these people from causing problems, just like he was everyone else. Anyone who thought that was remotely possible was an idiot. His real job was to stop anyone stupid enough to try and cause them trouble. Failing that, it was to scrape what was left of the troublemakers off the wall, then try to identify them for his report.

The long-haired woman, Constance Bahadir, was the one dealing with the officials, and certainly seemed more professional than her companions. Miguel was introduced and spoke with her long enough to offer a security detail. She declined.

Cloudweaver ran out of patience with the meet and greet. The air thrummed as aura erupted out of them and washed over the town. Miguel managed to swallow a groan at how much work that was going to cost him as the whole town was disrupted.

"He's not here," they growled. "We came all the way down this hole full of headache-inducing magic and he's not even here?"

"He's probably doing something dimensional," Emir said. "He's always up to things like that. Let's go find somewhere to sit down and get a drink."

“I would suggest the bar called the Speckled Egg,” Miguel said. “It’s pricy, but close, and the walls are enchanted to filter the natural array out of the ambient magic. Many of our more powerful visitors find it more accommodating to their needs.”

Emir looked Miguel over for a second, then gave a small nod. Miguel pointed back at the plaza and gave Emir simple directions. The four visitors left, some of the officials attempting to talk their way into accompanying them. A couple flashed dark looks at Miguel, which he ignored.

Miguel headed back for his office when he saw a line of dark energy, dancing like fire, appear on the ground in the portal area. From it rose an obsidian arch, containing a sheet of the same shadowy power. Portals weren’t impossible to open in Outer Rexion, but they were difficult. Usually, only portal specialists made the attempt, and he waited to see who emerged. To his surprise, it was his uncle.

“Miguel? Perfect. Good news, nephew; I’m getting you off this job.”

“Why?” Miguel asked, having trusted his uncle’s good news too many times before.

“Because I’ve gotten you a new one, obviously. You are going to be the Adventure Society liaison with Jason Asano.”

“Isn’t that the job you’ve been constantly complaining about since I was little?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“I’m quite certain it is. Remember aunt Maria’s birthday when you accidentally drank the gold-rank wine? You wouldn’t stop talking about it while the Healer priestess was removing the poison.”

“That doesn’t sound familiar. You’re probably thinking of something else.”

Miguel was about to respond when a second person emerged from the portal. His aura was silver rank, projected just enough to be polite, yet his presence stood out like the Cloudweaver’s.

“Your uncle loved the job,” the man said. “We hardly ever used him as bait when trawling for sea monsters.”

Miguel immediately understood two things. This man had to be Jason Asano, and he was not a silver ranker, whatever his aura claimed.

“It’s an honour to meet you, sir,” he said. “However, with respect, I feel that being your liaison with the Adventure Society is not a position that would have a positive outcome.”

“And why do you say that?” Asano asked.

“I’ve heard of you, sir.”

Jason laughed and slapped a hand on Vidal’s shoulder.

“You were right, he’ll do just fine. I have a long-overdue meeting with a diamond ranker, but get him set up.”

Asano stepped into Vidal’s shadow and fell into it, as if it was a hole in the ground. Miguel stared at the spot for a long time.

“Uncle?”

“Yes, Miguel?”

“Do you remember when I took this job and you told me I could quit if I wanted to?”

“I do.”

“I’m going to do that now.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Yes I am. I’m doing it now. I quit.”

“Sorry, boy. You should have tried that before people realised you were competent. Now, follow me through this portal. I have a lot to explain.”

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Jason and the Cloudweaver were opposite one another in a booth. The bar was large and clean, but cultivated a dingy atmosphere with dim lighting and décor heavy on dark wood and leather. Constance, Travis and Emir were sharing a round table next to the booth. Travis was already onto his third massive glass of some extremely blue beverage.

“What did you do to my cloud flask?” the Cloudweaver demanded.

Jason grinned at the question. They had sat in seething silence through his reunion with Travis, Constance and Emir. He could feel them heating up like a kettle and finally sat down to talk before they boiled over.

“I turned it into *my* cloud flask,” he said. “Leaving control access in a soul-bound item is always going to be unreliable, you had to know that. I pulled it into my soul instead of leaving it on the outside, and all your influence got pushed out.”

“How did you do that?”

“This is starting to feel like an interrogation, and I’m not sure you’re holding the moral high ground here. You’re the one who left shady back door access in my cloud flask.”

“Shady Back Door Access,” Travis echoed, his words slightly slurred. “Name of your sex tape.”

“Uh, that’s great, mate,” Jason said. “But maybe go over to the bar before the diamond ranker murders you with their eyes.”

Travis looked at the Cloudweaver, visibly gulped and hurried off. He hurried back, grabbed his half-finished drink and hurried off again.

“If I choose to make this an interrogation,” the Cloudweaver continued, “then that is what it shall be.”

“It will be a short one then,” Jason rebutted. “I have neither interest nor obligation in putting up with you playing strict nanny.”

The diamond ranker’s presence pressed in on Jason with such precision that no one else in the bar so much as glanced over. Jason opened his avatar up to his true self, fending off their power. A crack appeared in the wall next to them and they both backed off.

“That’s pretty good,” Jason said. “You’re on the road to cultivating a transcendent aspect. I haven’t really looked into how ranking up through diamond works yet. But don’t wave your stick at me, mate. Mine’s bigger.”

“If I used aura instead of presence, I could make that puppet you’re wearing bleed out its ears and die.”

“Sure, but that doesn’t get you what you want. You’re too smart to not know that. You’re poking me to see what happens. I’m guessing the diamond rank community is curious and wants you to feel me out.”

The anger in the Cloudweaver’s face vanished and they sat back with a smile.

“Yes,” they said. “When you came to this world for a second time, you were unstable. Prone to lashing out and making angry decisions. That was containable when you were just some silver ranker. Now you’re gold rank and something far more on top. We need to know if we should put you down while we still can.”

“I understand,” Jason said. “Wondering whether my power makes me too dangerous is kind of my thing.”

“Are you?”

“Probably, but you missed your window. I’m fully immortal, now. No more conditional resurrections. You can’t stop me from coming back because I don’t have to. As you said, you can break the puppet, but I just have to build a new one.”

He smiled.

“They call diamond rankers immortal, but we know you’re not. Not really. You can make them stay down, with enough effort. It doesn’t even take that much, really. Not with the right powers.”

“Is that a threat?”

“I have forever and can’t be stopped. You came here to see what happens if you and your friends decide to string me up. Now you know.”

“We already knew. It was suggested that we point out that your friends are not as immortal as you are, and you’ve sworn off resurrections for everyone, not just yourself.”

“It was suggested, was it?”

“It was.”

“And how was that suggestion received?”

“Some of us are very old, Asano. Old enough to have seen the world burn and history end. Magic helped civilisation rise up much earlier here than on your world. Earlier than most on this planet even realise. When diamond rankers go to war, only they survive. We want to avoid that just as much as you.”

“I’m not a diamond ranker.”

“No. On the mortal plane, you are below us, but in the realm to which we aspire, we are below you. Our hope is that we can guide one another in the areas we each lack.”

“I’ve got too much going on to even think about a diamond-rank transcendent study group.”

“Of course you do. You’re young. But we have forever. I’ve waited almost two decades to just hear about what you’ve done with your cloud flask. I would appreciate it if we could finally get to it now, though. If more of your friends arrive, I get the feeling it’ll be another two decades at least.”

## Chapter 897

### Like an Adventurer

Rick Geller and his team arrived just as a brothel fire sent a group of scantily clad women stumbling onto the street and right into Jason. Dustin Kettering, from Rick's team, went in and used his ice powers to extinguish the blaze.

"Are you setting these up?" Rick asked Jason incredulously.

"I'm genuinely not," Jason assured him. "Were you cursed by the god of lust or something?"

"No," Rick said, then gave his wife Hannah a side glance. She gave him an admonishing slap on the shoulder.

As Jason's friends arrived in ones and twos, the reunions were everything he'd been hoping for: hugs and jibes and promises of countless stories. More than just his team, many of his friends had gathered. Danielle Geller and her husband, Keith. The Remore family, minus Rufus. Jory Tillman and Gilbert Bertinelli both arrived with Clive.

Neil and Nik were portalled in from the Mirror Kingdom by the Mirror King's own portal specialist, courtesy of Team Shining Scabbard. They were led by Sigrid Freyn, a famously capable leader and healer Neil had been training with. Their teams had formed a friendship years earlier, going through the Reaper trials and training together at iron rank. Not having seen Jason since his first supposed death, Sigrid's now-husband, Prince Valdis, insisted on bringing the whole team along.

"Dad will miss Sigrid more than me," Valdis assured Jason on their arrival. "With how horny and immortal he is, the kingdom's thick with princes and princesses. He'll take a good adventurer over any of his kids."

"Then perhaps you should focus on being a good adventurer, instead of a mediocre prince," Sigrid pointed out. "Also, that is a gross misrepresentation of your father and your king. Be more respectful."

"This is why he likes her better," Valdis confided.

For all the joy of old friends coming together, Jason couldn't help but feel an undercurrent of melancholy. This wasn't the first reunion after events had dragged him away from his friends for years. This time he had missed more in their lives than before, and it would take time to learn who his friends were now.

Belinda was so much more centred than before. She no longer skirted around the edges of the group like an uncertain outsider, instead standing comfortably amongst the others. Estella, next to her, was much more a part of the group now. Their awkwardness

with Jory was noticeable, but also something they'd clearly come to terms with. Just reading body language showed Jason the years-long stories he'd not been around for.

Humphrey had talked with him about his propensity for leaving the team for years at a time. They understood that Jason did not want to leave alone but, however justified, his extended absences came with consequences.

Once everyone had arrived, they gathered around a banquet table in an outrageously expensive shaft-side restaurant. Sitting next to Jason, Humphrey leaned in close.

"Are you alright, Jason?"

"Yep. Why do you ask?"

"Your face is kind of switching back and forth between happy and angry."

"Happy means I'm thinking about being back here with everyone."

"And what does angry mean you're thinking about?"

"What happens to the next prick that tries to make me leave again."

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"And that," Sophie said, "was when he challenged Humphrey to a duel for my hand in marriage."

"I would like to point out," Humphrey said, "that it would have been easier to de-escalate the situation if you hadn't been cheering him on."

"But then he might not have fought you!"

"I didn't want him to fight me!"

"Oh, so you want one of those submissive wives that only do what *you* want?"

"What? No, that's not what I... hey, don't you Jason me. I have Jason for that now."

She grinned and leaned in for a kiss, leaving his expression cranky but appeased.

"I assume you won, and Sophie doesn't have to marry some random guy, right?" Nik asked. He was seated on the other side of Jason from Humphrey.

"I certainly hope not," Danielle said. "I'm not willing to give Sophie up as a daughter-in-law at this stage, and killing her new paramour wouldn't be good for my reputation."

"I could do it," Keith said.

"Of course you could, dear," Danielle said, patting him on the shoulder.

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"No," Jason said.

"I didn't even say anything yet," Clive complained.

"And you don't need to."

"That's just prejudicial," Clive said.

"So, that's not a notebook you have hidden under the banquet table?"

“Uh... no.”

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Late into the evening, the group had left the restaurant and taken over the lounge area of a nearby bar. Jason and Neil were sat together on a couch, a table full of empty glasses in front of them.

“So,” Jason said, slurring his words only a little, “you just told her it was for the best and immediately skipped town?”

“Yeah,” Neil said, likewise slightly wobbly. “I just kind of dropped it on her and left. I knew if I stayed, I’d make some kind of stupid decision.”

“It doesn’t matter how fast you run when you make the stupid choice first. You seriously didn’t go for a discussion before ending things? You just decided for both of you and did a runner?”

“I did discuss it.”

“With Cassandra? You said you blindsided her and bolted.”

“With Nik.”

“Well, I think I’ve spotted where you went wrong there, mate: Nik is a different person. Also, how old was he back then?”

“Um, five, maybe.”

“Yeah, that was a great idea. And this was what? Ten years ago?”

“About that. Do you think I messed up?”

“Well, you dumped her, basically shouted why at her while bolting out the door and then ghosted her for a decade. I’m going to say yeah, you messed up.”

Neil let out a groan and Jason put a commiserating arm around his slumped shoulders.

“Don’t worry about it, mate. We can fix this.”

Neil perked up, eyes full of drunken hope.

“You really think so?”

“No, she’s probably found someone much better. But we can try.”

Neil slumped back and let out another groan.

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“So, that’s the plan,” Jason summarised. “Head to Estercost to see how many people from Earth we can round up. Then we head to Rimaros, fix up the link between worlds and then ride it to the other universe. Anyone interested in seeing an alternate reality is welcome to come along.”

“You think it will be that simple?” Danielle Geller asked.



“Yes,” Jason said. “But simple is not the same thing as easy, as Clive is happy to explain.”

Zara’s suite was large, but still crowded with all of Jason friends packed in.

“Actually, I don’t have time for that,” Clive said. “Jason, you and I need to sit down and—”

“No time! We have to plan sightseeing stops along the trip. Definitely Greenstone. I’d love to see this world’s version of Australia, but I’m told everyone would die.”

“Jason,” Clive said through gritted teeth, “we really have to—”

“We can’t just go making elaborate plans,” Humphrey pointed out. “We tried that fifteen years ago and we only got from Rimaros to Yaresh. I think we should keep our plans more flexible.”

“Okay, you all need to stop—”

“Good thinking, Hump. Keep our options open, that’s sound tactical thinking.”

“Jason, you need to take this—”

“Don’t call me Hump.”

“Did someone use silence magic on me? This is not—”

“Good meeting, everyone. Give it some thought and we’ll regroup in Yaresh.”

“Jason,” Clive warned, “Don’t you dare—”

A portal opened up, then closed again after Jason ducked through. The rest of the group filtered out, leaving Clive, Belinda, Estella and Zara.

“I forgot,” Clive said, shaking his head. “It’s been too long, and I forgot.”

Belinda gave Clive an awkward pat on the back.

“I don’t mean to interrupt,” Zara said, “but I need to go check out of the room.”

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Marcus Xenoria was a massive leonid who liked to wander around with a huge axe slung casually over his shoulder. On meeting him, many wondered how that was helpful when his job primarily involved politics and bureaucracy. By the end of that meeting, they’d usually figured it out. As a high-level agent of the Adventure Society’s continental council, Marcus was a troubleshooter and enforcer. On hearing of Jason’s return, he had once again been dispatched to Yaresh.

Technically, Asano has already made contact with the Adventure Society, although that didn’t really count. He’d portalled directly into the — portal shielded — Rimaros branch office, abducting the deputy-director. The higher-ups had not been mollified when Ladiv announced that his nephew would be the society’s contact point for Asano.

Miguel Ladiv was now standing next to Marcus at the Adventure Society campus teleport platform in Yaresh. The boy looked like nervous sweat would make his new suit slip right off his body.

Asano emerged wearing a suit in the Rimaros summer style. It was more than a decade out of date, but he managed to make it look classic rather than dated. He managed this through a combination of excellent design and swagger with enough confidence to knock out a wall.

He stopped, his eyes glancing over Miguel before fixing on Marcus. They were not the eyes Marcus remembered, instead being dark and human. Behind Jason, the group emerging from the portal was eclectic even by Marcus' standards. First came Jason's shadow familiar, who was also a little different. There were flecks of glowing white in his dark form, marking out eyes and what was possibly the outline of some kind of formalwear.

Next came the most alien of the familiars, the avatar of doom. It had more orbs floating around it than before, but was otherwise the same at a glance. It was followed by what looked like Asano again, but with red orbs for eyes. He didn't carry himself quite the same, looking more like a boy trying to imitate his older brother.

Marcus recognised Jason's familiars, but wasn't expecting the last figure to emerge. It looked like a wood carving of Asano brought to life, complete with a coarse hessian version of his cloak. He joined the others in flanking Asano.

"A little high rank for a new familiar, aren't you, Asano?" Marcus asked by way of greeting.

"Not a familiar," Jason told him. "This is Arbour, one of my Voices of the Will."

"That's a phrase you might want to be careful about throwing around. We've been fighting the messengers a long time, now."

"Noted."

"I'm here because the Adventure Society is very eager for a debrief."

"Just the Adventure Society?"

"We made sure the others will leave you alone. For a while, at least, and no promises if we don't get some answers out of you to pass along."

Jason smiled sadly.

"There's a lot of answers I want as well," he said, then slowly turned on the spot while looking around. The Adventure Society campus was one of the few places left standing after the Battle of Yaresh, but he could see the reconstructed city all around. Most of the city was built into living trees, as was normal for an elf city. He could see one section of the city instead made from towers of glass, rising through the trees in the distance.

“Whoever they put me in a room with needs to understand that they get answers when I get mine.”

“They’ll understand. We’re getting used to getting caught in the wake of your chaos. You didn’t see the political tangle as the churches of Liberty and Knowledge fought over those Builder cultists you ripped the star seeds out of. I’m assuming that was one fo your questions.”

“It was,” Jason told him. “Sorry if I’m a little contentious. I was half expecting to find a gaggle of society officials waiting for me.”

“Oh, I imagine they’ll find you soon enough. But for now, I’m here to give you something we’ve been remiss with in the past.”

“And what’s that?”

“You’ve spent your entire career dealing with things beyond the purview of normal adventurers. Well beyond. And every time you do, there’s been someone waiting to give you grief when they should be throwing you a parade.”

He held out his hand and Jason shook it. The size difference was like a child shaking hands with a big furry mascot.

“Thank you, Jason Asano, for saving us from whatever gods-bedamned cosmic nonsense was coming for us this time. And thank you for doing it like an adventurer.”

## Chapter 898

### People Think You're Blowing Up Cities

Shortly after visiting Yaresh, Jason and Sophie had participated in a fighting arena. The venue, like most of the city, had been wiped out during the messenger invasion. As part of the reconstruction, the old arena was replaced with a massive mirage chamber. The domed building, constructed from hexagonal segments of stained glass, was a landmark that curved high over the trees.

Mirage chambers created false environments where people could be projected into as illusionary doubles of themselves. Because these illusion bodies were made using soul projection, the real body could experience everything their replicas did. This meant that pain was real, but the only actual harm they faced was psychological. The doubles could be injured or even die without the real body suffering the same.

Smaller mirage chambers were used for training purposes, such as the one at the Geller family training centre in Greenstone. Massive arena venues, like the new one in Yaresh, were designed for public spectacle. These were magical colosseums where the dead gladiators respawned at the end, ready to fight another day. The gladiators here were also not slaves. Dedicated mirage fighters were akin to sporting stars on Earth, earning wealth and fame for their skills.

Despite the existence of such celebrities, however, the biggest spectacles came from the inclusion of famous adventurers on the drawcard. Whether against one another or the local professionals, adventurer participation always pulled in crowds. This was amply demonstrated by the full seating around the arena, despite the short notice of the current event.

The Duke of Yaresh was in the largest of the VIP boxes. The size of a ballroom, it had one glass wall that looked out onto the arena, and could also serve as a projection screen when powers and the environment obscured the action. It wasn't the fighting that the duke was here for, however. Inside the room right now was arguably the most prestigious gathering the city had ever seen. With Yaresh attempting to re-establish itself as a regional power, social gathering like this would help mark it as a place of influence and power.

That Yaresh had not just one but two resident diamond rankers was an incredible boon. Lord Charist was the more social of the two, but it was the more reclusive Lady Allayeth who graced the room with her presence today. Around her was the team she had

raised up herself, Moon's Edge, now famous in their own right. Compared to some of the others present, however, they were practically anonymous.

The duke had — in private — laughed like a madman as internationally famous adventurers descended on his city, one after another. Team Biscuit has been on the rise for years, much of their early reputation built right here in Yaresh. Not only were they known for their success in the field, but also boasted many impressive members.

Gellers were always noticeable, of course, especially the son of Danielle Geller. They also counted the Archchancellor of the Magic Research Association in their number. He was famous as much for the Magic Society's hatred of him as the success of his fledgeling organisation. Then there was a former holder of the Hurricane Princess title. Zara Nareen wasn't *technically* a princess at the moment, but anyone who thought she was genuinely ostracised from the Storm Kingdom's royal family was a political buffoon.

In the cavalcade of famous adventurers descending upon Yaresh, Team Biscuit was only the beginning. Team Blood and Gold had a husband-and-wife duo from the Remore family, plus the vaunted treasure hunter, Emir Bahadir. Team Shining Scabbard was a well-known group who apparently knew Team Biscuit from years earlier. They also had royalty in the group, although that was less impressive with the Mirror Kingdom's surplus of princes and princesses. That said, the duke admired the administrative prowess of Prince Valdis in assembling the arena event in less than two days.

There were others as well. Danielle Geller was talking with the enormous Adventure Society official who mercifully hadn't brought his axe. There were also some local luminaries, although they seemed less impressive in this company. Notable in their absence were certain members of Yaresh high society known for letting their petty pride create diplomatic issues. The duke was pleasantly surprised at not only their absence, but their failure to come to his door, complaining at their exclusion. If he got nothing else from the night, he intended to learn how Prince Valdis had managed that minor miracle.

The duke moderated himself while circulating amongst the visitors. As valuable as these connections were, he was cognisant of this being a genuine social event. These were actual friends, reuniting after a long time apart, not a calculated political exchange. The inclusion of select locals demonstrated the political dexterity of the Mirror Kingdom prince.

The duke was diligent in his attention to all the attendees, not just those who were famous adventurers. This proved wise when the fashion designer turned out to be one of those octuplet sets that every major city seemed to have one of. The duke was careful not

to offend any gods, let alone one as important as Fertility, and it reminded him to be wary of dragons lurking around Jason Asano.

The person this gathering had been arranged for was the one the duke knew the least about. He had heard a great deal, but little of it seemed reliable. The stories surrounding Asano were contradictory, nonsensical and often straight-up unbelievable. Even so, he was unable to dismiss them out of hand. Too many had been confirmed by people whose judgement he trusted.

Asano himself was standing in front of the glass, watching the matches below. The duke was patient, and perhaps a little trepidatious, given what he wanted to discuss. More than just taking a measure of the man, the duke needed to know if Asano's return heralded the same chaos as it had in the past.

The duke moved to stand next to Asano when the stocky elf he was speaking with headed for the buffet table. Asano greeted him somewhat standoffishly, not taking his eyes from the match below. The duke followed his gaze to see Prince Valdis once again in a fight. An enthusiastic and repeat participant, his sword master specialty excelled against other essence users.

The prince was fast, elusive and made powerful hit-and-run strikes in a skirmisher combat style. It had proven effective in duels against even the prestigious adventurers gathered around, and made a grand spectacle for the citizens of Yaresh. Its biggest weakness was against evasion-type protection specialists, as a dark-skinned woman with silver hair was demonstrating.

The duel came to an end, the prince taking his rare loss in stride as he played up to the crowd. The illusionary arena of sand and stone vanished, revealing the very full stands arrayed around the mirage chamber. The duke stood beside Asano, watching the prince walk off as the next challenger came out.

"That is her husband, yes?" the duke said.

"They haven't married yet. Soon, I expect."

"Who do you think will win?"

"She will. Humphrey is well-trained, but he's a monster fighter at heart. He was trained to work in a team, fighting hordes and giants, not people. He's good at it, don't get me wrong, but Sophie is something special. She learned to fight in a cage, where losing meant waking up in a ditch, or chained to a bed. That breeds a determination to win that's hard to match."

The duke found himself a little confused. Some of his advisors had warned that being in Asano's presence was intimidating, but he found it not the case at all. Asano radiated nothing more than a polite amount of aura that revealed his rank.

"You have a remarkable and loyal group of friends, to come running from across the world."

"I do," he agreed warmly. "I simply wish I didn't find myself removed for them for so long. Or so often."

The duke steeled his resolve. He's been told that blunt honesty was the best approach with Asano, but that seemed dangerous.

"I hope you will forgive my rudeness, Mr Asano, but will you be staying in Yaresh long?"

"No. Worried I'll cause trouble?"

"Cause might be the wrong word, and I certainly want to make no accusations. That being said, Adventure Society branch directors have standing orders to go on low alert should you arrive in their area. That order was reissued when they got word of your return."

"That seems a little excessive."

"Perhaps so, Mr Asano. But when you went to Rimaros, the Builder almost dropped another city on it out of the sky. There's a new island there now. Here in Yaresh, the messengers tore the city down to the foundations."

"The Builder attacked everywhere, as did the messengers. We only came to Yaresh because you were already fighting the messengers here."

"But you cannot deny that both forces seem more interested in you than other adventurers. And from here, you went to the brightheart city which, to my understanding, you entirely wiped from reality."

"I built a new one."

"And a very nice one it is, but I believe most people are happy with the cities they already have."

"Well, the brighthearts weren't. Theirs was an undead wasteland."

"So I understand. But the fact stands, Mr Asano, that cities have a habit of requiring significant rebuilding after you've passed through."

"I do want to claim extenuating circumstances," Asano acknowledged, his tone weary but amused. "But there's only so many times every city you visit can blow up before people think you're blowing up cities."

Relief flooded through the duke. He saw a small smile cross Asano's lips and realised the man was probably reading his emotions. It was rude, but also a little impressive. It was hard to do so unnoticed on someone of the same rank, even if the duke got to gold rank through monster cores.

"You've been to Rexion?" Asano asked.

"Many times. I was not being obsequious when I said it was a very nice place. The relationship with Rexion was critical to feeding my people in the early days of the reconstruction. We're still in the process of restoring the wider region, even now. Remnants of the apocalypse beasts unleashed by the messengers took years to fully root out. Even now, we can never be entirely certain we got them all."

The duke shook his head before continuing.

"Whole towns were depopulated, and trying to get people to move in and restart the farms was difficult. There was a lot of reluctance, and understandably so. Whole towns full of people who died under extremes of misery and violence? Seeing family members transformed into monsters and puppets? Quite aside from the trauma people need to confront, those are conditions for spawning some of the nastier kinds of undead."

"I saw something similar in the original brightheart city."

"No Undeath priests here, thankfully. There were some regular necromancers, but the Adventure Society deal with them quite aggressively."

"It sounds like you've had your work cut out for you."

"Indeed. Before the messengers, there were always those looking to snake my position. Sniping politicians and backstabbing noble houses. Now they've spent a decade praying for my good health. No one wants to be duke when it means rebuilding the whole damn duchy from nothing."

"And now that you're seeing results, you don't want the city destroying guy to tear it all down again."

"I do not mean to accuse or offend, Mr Asano, nor am I asking you to leave. But yes, I fear what your presence means for us. When fate places someone at the centre of events, it is those around them who tend to suffer."

"Something I have sadly come to learn. I understand, Duke, and sympathise with your position."

"Thank you. I won't pretend to understand the events you find yourself at the centre of. I am simply asking if your return signals a threat to Yaresh of which I am unaware."

"Not that I'm aware of, Duke. But it's the one you don't know about that gets you, isn't it?"



“Yes,” the duke agreed. “Yes, it is.”

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Jason watched the duke move on to other conversations as Farrah took his place. Humphrey had lost, as predicted, but had made it harder on Sophie than expected.

“You’ve been dodging me,” Jason said, keeping his gaze fixed on the arena. “Odd behaviour for a reunion.”

“Yeah,” Farrah conceded, more subdued than he was used to.

“Something to do with you still being silver rank?”

“Yeah.”

Jason’s team had all reached gold. Rick Geller’s was getting there, with Rick and his sister Phoebe both having done so recently. The rest of their team were in the upper reaches of silver.

“We need to have a decent talk about things,” Farrah said. “And I suppose I have a choice to make.”

“Yes,” Jason said softly.

“I felt it, you know? The moment you became... whatever you are now. The System showed up for everyone, but I *felt* it.”

“I know. Have you talked about it with anyone?”

She shook her head.

“Did you know?” she asked. “When we formed that bond. When we strengthened it. Did you know?”

“No. Neither of us knew, back then.”

“Dawn didn’t tell you something?”

“I don’t think even she knew. There are things she told me that she was absolutely wrong about. What’s happening with me — with us — is probably not unique, but it’s rare. Even by cosmic standards. We’re making up the rules as we go.”

He turned to look around the room behind them, their conversation kept private by his aura.

“We can have this out properly when we’re alone,” he said.

She nodded.

“It is good having you back, Jason.”

She walked away and Rick Geller moved to join Jason in her place. They watched his sister walk out to meet Sophie in the arena.

“You and me in a mirage chamber again,” Rick said.

“Don’t remind me,” Jason responded.

“You say that as if you weren’t the one who had his whole team stomped by someone who didn’t know magic even existed a year earlier.”

“By running around like a fool and cackling like a witch. Surely, it’s been long enough that those recordings are all gone.”

“Are you kidding? It’s required training material at the family training centre. I didn’t hear the end of it when I spent a year instructing in Greenstone.”

Jason waved over a server, grabbing glasses of wine for himself and Rick. Then he held up his glass.

“To Jonah.”

Rick’s eyes soften and he clinked his glass to Jason’s.

“To Jonah,” he echoed, then drained the glass.

Jonah had been a member of Rick’s team until the ill-fated expedition from Greenstone that had killed many adventurers, including Farrah. Jonah had been captured and implanted with a star seed by the Builder cult, and died in the process of having it extracted. He had been part of the group that fought Jason all those years ago, in the Geller mirage chamber.

Rick nodded to Jason and then moved on. The next person to circulate Jason’s way was Clive, holding a notebook. He was shoved out of the way by an excited Prince Valdis.

“Jason! When are you going to get out there? Everyone wants to see how you got to gold rank when you spent the last fifteen years sitting in a magic box meditating or whatever.”

“That’s not really how it worked.”

“Then show us!”

“Sorry about him,” Sigrid said, also moving past an increasingly cranky Clive.

“I’m not sure that me going down there is a good idea,” Jason said. “Mirage chambers are soul projection devices. I don’t know how they’ll interact with my avatar, which is also a soul projection device.”

“You’re just scared of how badly I’ll beat you, aren’t you?”

“You got me, Valdis. I’m just scared.”

“Or harder to provoke than a nine-year-old,” Sigrid muttered.

Clive, watching the exchange, turned to the room.

“Hey everyone!” he announced. “Who wants to see Jason Asano in a proper gold-rank fight?”

Jason gave Clive a flat look as the room filled with cheers.