

Chapter 633

Not You

“That’s the first thing you ask about?” Jason said. “My cloud flask? After I go off into your astral space and die?”

“You’re going to talk to me about causing trouble?” Emir asked. “There are about a hundred outworlders who arrived in the wake of you coming back, and you’ve just left them on the other side of the world while you’re playing with your great astral being friends. Since you keep not showing up, who do you think people bother about it? Anyone in the area who knows you, that’s who. Vitesse isn’t even that close.”

“The great astral beings are not my friends. They’re... business acquaintances.”

“I’ve been hearing something about a diamond-ranker you’ve been running around with. Doesn’t she work for one of them?”

“You mean Soramir? No, he doesn’t work for them.”

“You know full well I do not mean Soramir. You remember that Arabelle is one of my closest friends in the world, right?”

“I also know that Callum is one of your closest friends, and that guy has been all sorts of trouble. And Arabelle has strict rules about confidentiality, so don’t try to goad me into spilling the beans that way.”

“There are beans to spill, then?”

Jason laughed.

“What are you reaching out for?” he asked.

“Something that is better discussed in person,” Emir said. “There’s a few too many ears on these water-link chambers, whatever they tell you. There’s a city called Isart that you should arrive at on your procession south.”

“Yes, although we’re about to detour, so we won’t be racing down there.”

“Detour?”

“Messenger activity,” Jason said. “We’re going to take a look at what we’re up against.”

“Just be careful. I’ll meet you in Isart when you’re done and we can talk about a job.”

“I don’t have a job for you,” Jason told Emir. “Still, I’ll keep your application on file and if anything comes up...”

“I see that going up a couple of ranks hasn’t managed to instil a reverence for higher-rankers. I imagine that was inevitable, given the stories floating around about you.”

Emir smiled, but there was a grimness to his eyes.

“Do me a favour and don’t take too long to get to Isart,” he told Jason.

“Oh bloody hell,” Jason complained. “I’m getting that fate-of-the-world feeling again. Does it really have to be me?”

“Nothing that drastic,” Emir said. “But there’s something out there that will cause a major shift in some of the foundational elements of society. We need to find it before someone who shouldn’t does, and they’re already ahead of us in the search.”

“Emir, that sounds exactly like what I’m trying to avoid. I just want some good, honest adventuring.”

“That’s exactly what this is. It’s not about you, Jason. It’s a good old-fashioned race to the magical treasure. You and your team just happen to be the best people for the job.”

Jason perked up.

“Okay, now I’m more interested.”

“Then meet me in Isart. I’ll be arriving there in about two weeks. Also, I’ll have the person who made our cloud flasks with me. She’s very interested in what we’ve been hearing about what you did to yours. I think.”

“You think she’s very interested?”

“No, I’m certain about the interest, I’m just not certain she’s a she. She keeps changing it up on me.”

“Gender fluid diamond ranker? That is interesting. Having some trouble with your pronouns, Emir?”

Emir’s water clone looked surprised.

“I thought I was going to throw you off with that.”

Jason laughed.

“You have no idea how many people back where I come from would appreciate having magic to help them transition,” he said, then frowned. “Actually, that’s probably becoming more of an option, now, which will be a giant political garbage fire. I bet they find some way to blame me.”

Liara returned Jason to the room in the Adventure Society campus from which he could portal out.

“Any word on those idiots that broke into my cloud house?” Jason asked Liara.

“Yes,” she said with a nod. “As far as we can tell, they’re a bunch of idle rich from extremely wealthy families. Too important to not foster, thus getting them to gold rank on cores, but too incompetent to give any actual responsibility. It seems that they got it into their heads to prove themselves and started taking work for hire, as a group.”

“And, despite their idiocy, they’re gold rank,” Jason mused. “People will overlook a lot if it lets them hire a gold rank team on the cheap.”

“Yes, but we don't think the person that sent them after you was concerned with their ability. We haven't determined who it was yet, but the motivation seems related to their local politics, not you. You were chosen because you were far enough away that the fools wouldn't know they were jumping into the shark's mouth while being important enough that it would be an embarrassment to their families.”

Jason groaned as he ran his hands over his face.

“Is this going to be yet another thing I’m caught up in?”

“Actually,” Liara said, “if you’re willing to let this go, you’ll find some powerful families owe you a favour if you ever find yourself in that part of the world.”

“Let this go, meaning walk away and not have anything more to do with it?”

“If you’re willing to give up revenge, yes.”

“Yeah, let’s do that,” Jason said hurriedly. “Just warn me before any blowback from this hits me, yeah?”

“As best as I am able,” Liara said. “I handed it off to the family’s political specialists once we knew that your involvement was peripheral. They will keep looking into the situation.”

Jason drew out the ritual circle required to circumvent the protections and open his portal arch. He didn't go through immediately, and instead turned to face Travis and Farrah. He shook Travis by the hand and shared a hug with Farrah.

“Just don’t go off and die the second I’m not watching over you,” she said. “You have the life expectancy of a friend of Jessica Fletcher’s who is visiting from out of town.”

Jason chuckled as he went through the arch, which then vanished into the ground.

“Who’s Jessica Fletcher?” Travis asked.

“From *Murder She Wrote*,” Farrah said. “How can you not know that show?”

“When was it on?”

“1984 through 1996. They made twelve seasons. It’s a cultural touchstone.”

“Before I was alive, maybe. That bond ability of yours that lets you take information out of people's heads; I'm not sure you should have ever used it on Jason.”

Jason stepped out of the portal arch in his cabin on the cloud yacht and it closed behind him. He could have spoken to Farrah, their new bond allowing him to open up a voice chat over large distances, but he resisted the urge. The bond was there if he went looking for it, but was otherwise unnoticeable. He let out a sigh.

“Are you alright, Mr Asano?” Shade asked, emerging from Jason’s shadow.

“Yeah. It just feels like... I don’t know. Like a clean cut has been made. Farrah and I have been running around together for a long time, now. I guess the ground just doesn’t feel as stable without her here. Even with the bond, her absence seems palpable. I know I’ve always got you, but, no offence, you’re a spirit of darkness and death older than the human race. On Earth, at least. Your perspective isn’t something a flickering candle like me can always relate to. Even if I end up living for millennia, right now, I’m not even thirty.”

“I understand, Mr Asano. I have found that there is a strange dichotomy between existing for epochs, yet living moment to moment, like everyone else. My perspective, as an ancient entity, puts me at a separation from most beings. I suspect it is what has driven me to become a familiar. To insert myself into the lives of the short-lived and immerse myself in their cultures and interests. You will find, Mr Asano, that even when you can survive for millennia, you have to live day by day, just like everyone else.”

“You know what, Shade? I take it back. You are relatable. Thanks for sticking with me through so much nonsense.”

“Immortality can be hard sometimes, Mr Asano. I hope that you will live long enough to that I can help guide you through it. It becomes isolating as you find yourself slipping further and further from the concerns of mortality. Miss Dawn understood this. You have put her on the start of a journey I began a long time ago.”

“Shade, Have I ever told you that you are amazing?”

“Many times, Mr Asano.”

“Good. Because you are.”

One of the reasons that the Storm Kingdom stood out on the global stage was that there were very few regions with a celestine majority, and it was the largest of them by far. Having moved south of there, the convoy found itself increasingly in elf-held territories. This excited Jason less because of the elves themselves, of whom he had known many, and because of the differences in culture that came with encountering them on home turf. Instead of having their own enclaves in places where they were a minority, this was the elves in their element, and Jason was not disappointed.

The smaller towns and villages hadn’t been a lot different to what he had seen elsewhere, but as the convoy approached a small city, Jason watched from the roof deck in wonder. To Jason’s eyes, the architecture poking up out of the rainforest was a mix of ancient civilisation and absolute modernity, with ziggurats built from the shining glass of skyscrapers and gothic towers made of gleaming metal.

The city materials seemed dominated by metal and glass from a distance, although only the uppermost building areas could be seen above the rainforest. Much of it had a green tint, reminding Jason of Greenstone. Here the shades were much darker than that city's signature stone, but the bright sunlight drew out gorgeous colours.

From what Jason could see, the city was not exclusionary of the rainforest, which was let into the city and incorporated into the city planning. He presumed it was in a carefully controlled fashion and he looked forward to going in and looking around for himself. Before that, however, he had a task ahead of him.

The convoy split up at the city outskirts. Arabelle continued forward with her relatively modest vehicle, while Carlos and Korinne left their vehicles behind. Carlos cadged a ride with Korinne's team on the more manageable skimmer docked on the roof of their new vehicle.

The passengers of Jason's hover yacht all exited, including Melody under Sophie's watchful eye.

Jason plucked the tiny cloud flask from his necklace and sat it on the ground as it grew to its regular size of a large chemistry flask. The hover yacht started dissolving into wispy cloud that flowed into the flask. Everyone stood around watching the process, which would take around ten minutes. Jason started pulling out the crates, sacks and barrels he acquired in Rimaros from his inventory. Melody approached him while he did so.

"My daughter tells me that it was your idea to add windows to my cabin," she said.

"Your daughter said you were getting a little antsy."

"Do you expect me to be grateful? That amenities and little luxuries you've provided will win me over? Do you think I don't see that it's an easy way to build up a sense of thankfulness that makes up one of many steps to you having me open up and give you what you want?"

"I don't want anything from you, Mrs Jain. What I want is relaxing days spent visiting interesting places, with no hassles. You are a hassle. I'd be happy to throw you in a box and forget about you, or hand you over to any of the many people that want to get their hands on you. As we speak, my familiar is scouting the area in case someone is following us, waiting for the chance to pounce and take you away. You got those windows because it makes your daughter happy. I couldn't care less about you. I checked."

"Do you practise these little speeches in case the right situation comes up, or is it all off the top of your head?" Melody asked. "I'm not sure which one is worse. They both require a profoundly pompous mindset."

Jason laughed.

“I won’t argue with that, Mrs Jain. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to put a very large amount of things into a very small bottle.”

Once the flask had been refilled, Jason started opening containers full of materials. Sheets of metal, bags of powder, magically-crafted crystals and barrels of alchemical liquids were tipped into the flask. Some went in via a funnel, like power and water. For solid objects, Jason poked them at the flask and they slowly dissolved into a mist that the flask then sucked into itself.

This went on for several hours as Jason pulled the many containers Liara had prepared from his inventory. Belinda and Clive took out all the disassembled submarine parts they had as well. Once all the materials were finally consumed, Jason was about ready to test out the new potential of his cloud constructs. Before he began, he turned his head as he sensed Korinne’s team returning from the city.

On their arrival, Korinne’s team found Jason waiting with a scowl. They disembarked from the skimmer, which had all eight seats filled. There were the six members of Korinne’s team, plus Carlos and one more person.

“Care to explain yourself?” Jason demanded of Korinne, not looking at the newcomer.

“We found a new team member,” Korinne said.

“I’ll remind you, Lady Pescos, that while you are operating as a part of this convoy, you are under certain restrictions that you would otherwise not be, should you be operating alone.”

“I’m well aware of the need for secrecy,” Korinne said. “But she already knows your secrets, so there isn’t a problem.”

“Explaining the full inaccuracy of what you just said will take no small amount of time,” Jason said. “For now, go back to your vehicle and we’ll discuss this later.”

“This convoy might be built around you, Mr Asano, but you don’t tell my team what to—”

Korinne stopped talking as she felt the pressure of an aura she thought Jason could only produce with the aid of his massive cloud construct. It carried the cold anger of an icy hell and had Korinne's team reaching for weapons until it receded after a short moment.

“Go back to your vehicle, Lady Pescos,” Jason repeated softly. Korinne and her team looked to Amos Pensinata for support but saw nothing beyond his usual stoicism. Orin was the first to follow Jason's directive, but the others soon followed. Korinne was the last to move, none of the fear in her aura showing in her expression or body language. The newcomer moved to follow.

“Not you,” Jason said, turning his gaze on her. He looked her up and down, his expression fierce. Her adventuring gear was plain and practical, mostly covering her smooth, caramel skin. Her milky-teal hair spilled down past her shoulders and her matching eyes stared back at Jason. Despite himself, Jason couldn't help but reflect that the young woman in front of him was more beautiful than the nineteen-year-old girl she had been when they met in a tent five years earlier. She might have changed her distinctive sapphire hair and eyes, but there was no hiding the exquisite beauty of Zara Rimaros.