

Chapter 933

The Line Between Mortal and Immortal

Vandrick arrived at the entrance to Jason Asano's cloud palace. There was a mob out front, and had been since the System went dark. They were pretending to be a spontaneously formed group, protesting the heavy-handed influence of the outsider. Anyone with any real knowledge was aware they had been placed by certain noble houses of Cyrion, anticipating negative attention regarding potential actions against Asano. The 'spontaneous' crowd was one of the ways they were working to shape the narrative.

The palace was on a lake reserved for cloud constructs and other temporary floating structures. Vandrick recognised the palace of Emir Bahadir floating nearby, the man and his retinue having arrived the day before. Vandrick respected his loyalty, arriving to support a friend who had much of the world against him right now.

Vandrick let out the faintest whiff of diamond-rank aura as he approached the crowd. They were instantly falling over themselves to clear a path. They were gathered on the shore where a cloud bridge extended to the palace. The bridge itself being empty suggested it would disappear from under the feet of unwelcome visitors. Vandrick walked slowly across, observing the cloud palace. Rather than one massive structure, it was a complex of buildings, linked by enclosed sky bridges and underwater tunnels.

The design of the buildings was in the Vitesse style, complete with plants growing over and out of every part of the building. Moss covered much of the white cloud walls. Leafy vines dangled from balconies and flowers bloomed on windowsills. Even the underwater tunnels were coated in kelp and coral. Asano apparently favoured tropical plants, with vibrant greens and large, bright flowers.

The large double doors opened at Vandrick's approach, revealing an atrium more like a garden than a room. He stepped inside and immediately froze, having felt something he hadn't in a long time: threatened. A small smile played across his lips.

"Interesting," he murmured as he looked around.

The entrance was a multi-storey atrium, with even more plants than the exterior. Multiple waterfalls spilled from mezzanine levels into water features, running through the garden that filled the floor. Paths led through the gardens and over little bridges to doors and stairwells set into the walls. The air was humid, with the splashing of the waterfalls and the sounds of birds and insects. High above, the atrium seemed open to the sky, but Vandrick could sense a barrier of invisible mist.

His gaze settled on the one feature whose purpose he wasn't sure of. An alcove in the wall had a series of narrow poles that appeared to rise into the upper reaches of the building. There was a sign with a name on it behind each pole, matching each member of Asano's team. He noted that the one labelled 'Neil' had a thicker pole than the others.

Vandrick heard something from above, and a moment later, someone slid down one of the poles. Both his aura and the sign behind his pole said that this was Jason Asano. He was wearing tan short pants, sandals and a colourful shirt with a tropical flower print.

"G'day, bloke. What can I do you for?"

"The Queen of Estercost and several other interested parties have asked me to arbitrate over your withdrawal of the System."

"Meaning they asked you to come in here, hold me upside down and shake me until the System falls out."

"They phrased it differently, but that was the general sentiment."

"But you're not going to do that, are you?"

"No. But it is time someone sat down with you and had a discussion."

"About?"

"You stand with a foot on each side of a dangerous line, Mr Asano. I'm hoping to help you navigate it successfully."

"That sounds good. And call me Jason."

"Very well, Jason. My name is Vandrick Macarro, but you may call me Van."

"Okay, Van. I just made some scones I've got on a cooling rack upstairs, so we'll have to chat there."

Vandrick glanced over at the alcove with the poles.

"We don't have to use those, do we?"

"No," Jason said with a laugh. "They're for coming down only."

"That doesn't seem efficient when gold rankers can levitate quite effectively, even without your aura advantages."

"Oh, it's definitely not efficient. But what's the point of living forever if you don't take the time to have fun?"

Jason started floating into the air and Vandrick followed. On the highest mezzanine, they landed and walked down a hallway where the floor was wooden slats over running water. Plants lined the walls, and a fresh breeze blew through.

"That music is unlike anything I've heard," Vandrick said. "Is it from your world?"

"Yeah, that's Laura Branigan."

Jason led Vandruck to an expansive kitchen that opened onto a covered balcony. Flowering vines draped from overhead, dangling over a picnic table. Sitting at it were four people, including one with the characteristic broad shoulders and chiselled features of a Geller. That would be Humphrey, one of the family's more famous members. The woman next to him was probably his mother, based on their shared complexion and the interaction of their auras. Sitting opposite them were Emir Bahadir, who Vandruck had met, and a woman who was likely his wife.

"I'm just going to sell my cows at Kansas City," Emir said. "Give me six extra dollars."

"You know you'll lose points for that," his wife told him.

"And if I don't get more money, I won't get any more points than what I have."

In the kitchen, two women were wearing aprons and stirring something in a large bowl each.

"No, Sophie, stop," one of them said.

"Oh, come on, Ketis. What's wrong now?"

"You're going too fast. Even ignoring the spatter, we're making whipped cream, not butter."

"I like butter," Sophie said defensively.

"This is for the scones."

"I like butter on scones."

Ketis noticed them enter, despite Vandruck's aura being fully withdrawn. She was the only one who stared, the others glancing his way before going back to what they were doing. It was a novel experience for Vandruck, the diamond ranker normally getting a very different reception.

"Who's your friend?" Sophie asked. "The Adventure Society finally send a diamond ranker to spank you?"

"Something like that. Everyone, this is Vandruck. Vandruck, this is everyone. Well, not everyone. Where are the others?"

"Like you can't sense exactly where they are," Sophie told him.

"I like to give people their privacy," Jason said.

"Zara, Farrah and Lindy are still swimming," Ketis said. Her tone was distracted as she continued to stare at the diamond-rank visitor. "Humphrey's dad kept trying to pinch the scones and Stash dragged him away. He knows a lot about baking for a dragon."

"The others should be back soon," Humphrey said. "They went to the market to see how many types of jam they could find."

Emir and his wife rose from the table, approaching to offer a respectful greeting. He introduced his wife, Constance, then they went back to their game. Danielle Geller didn't move to introduce herself, but did nod a greeting when he spotted her looking him over.

In their previous meeting, Bahadir had the fear Vandrick was used to from people when meeting diamond rankers. The rest of the group seemed the same, aside from the one girl still staring at him. He was halfway tempted to leak some of his aura to see what happened, but squashed the immature urge.

Jason led Vandrick into an adjoining room, a door of mist forming to seal them off. When it did, the sound from outside vanished, despite this room also being open to the outside. Again, Vandrick sensed a powerful but invisible mist barrier. The room was a meditation space, in a rustic tropical style with woven floor mats. It reminded Vandrick of Arnote, the least populous of the three islands of Rimaros. At a gesture from Jason, two streams of cloud rose from the floor. They took the form of wicker chairs, facing one other. Jason claimed one while waving Vandrick towards the other.

"So," Jason said. "What brings you by, Van?"

"You're in a very odd position, Jason. You're gold rank, but you're also somewhere on the far side of diamond. We diamond rankers, and now the Adventure Society, have largely decided to split the difference and consider you a diamond ranker."

"I've been told as much. I'm guessing this is the conversation where you give me the talk about how to behave like a good diamond ranker."

"Not exactly. Diamond rankers, as a rule, don't like being told what to do. They tend to react quite drastically."

"I should fit right in, then."

"Actually, yes, although your unusual circumstances present commensurately unusual challenges. The line between diamond rank and everything below it is more extreme than at any other rank. The line between gold and diamond is the threshold between mortality and immortality, with diamond rankers being ageless and near immortal. Accordingly, we move away from mortal concerns, all the more as time rolls on. We don't have rules, as such, although we do step in when those amongst us get out of line. What we do have is etiquette."

"Meaning that if I'm a naughty boy, I won't get the rest of you coming down on me. You'll just all think that I'm an asshole."

"Something like that, yes. I had a discussion with the Queen, along with other members of the Estercost elite and a number of ambassadors. I told them that the position of the diamond rank community is that the System is yours to administer."

“Meaning you told them they aren’t allowed to go after me over it.”

“Yes. But that also means that if anyone should go after you, they are disregarding us to do so.”

Jason narrowed his eyes.

“You want me to be the one who smacks down anyone who decides to come after me over it.”

“We do. Which brings us back the points of etiquette. Diamond rankers, on this world, at least, are the ultimate symbols and expressions of power. We expect one another to respect that, and act in such a way that the rest of the world does as well. There are several tenets to this, and one is that we take care of our own business. That is not to say that we don’t lean on our friends and connections, but we are expected to hold our own. When a diamond ranker helps another diamond ranker, it is because they are friends or allies, not out of diamond ranker solidarity. If you can’t stand alone, the rest of us will stand by as your legs are cut out from under you.”

“So, the first rule of being the most powerful is you have to be the most powerful.”

“Precisely. The second tenet of diamond-rank etiquette is to respect the boundary between mortal and immortal. When a diamond ranker is young, we are a lot more flexible about this. You have descendants to watch over, interests from your mortal days you don’t want to see fall apart. Most of all, you still think like a mortal. But after half a millennium or so, you are expected to step back. If we do everything for them, and never let them find their own way, we stunt them. Left to their own devices, mortals will always surprise you. There is a drive that comes with mortality that pushes them to innovate. To make things better. The passion of youth.”

Vandrick pointed a casual finger at Jason.

“That’s where you are now. You have power, maybe more than you ever thought you would. You want to use it, to make things better.”

“And hopefully not make them worse.”

“That is always the danger,” Vandrick agreed. “We give more leeway to young diamond rankers, but the danger of them causing harm is why we expect them to limit themselves. Let us look at some of the young diamond rankers you know. Allayeth and Charist limit themselves geographically, for example, restricting themselves to Yareh and the surrounding regions. The Mirror King is much the same in his own territory. Roland Remore’s agenda is more expansive, but he rarely brings his direct power to bear. He limits himself to mostly working through agents and proxies.”

“And you expect me to limit myself.”

“No one is going to force you. What we hope is that you come to understand the virtues of limiting our influence on the mortal world. I suspect, given your positions on power and authority, that this would be a natural fit for you.”

“You’re not wrong,” Jason conceded.

“I will say this,” Vandrick said. “There is an expectation that very new diamond rankers will run a little wild. Settle old scores and instigate changes in mortal society they have always wanted to. So long as they don’t take anything too far, the rest of us let this go. What’s the point of achieving more power than almost anyone, ever, if you’re just going to be told not to do the things you always wanted to do?”

“That seems reasonable.”

“I think so. The rule of thumb is that everyone gets one. One great big world changing action that affects the mortals. After that, you’re expected to be more nuanced in your approach. You have forever, so there is an expectation that you will be patient.”

“And mine is using the System to try and get everyone to abolish slavery.”

“Yes. As such, no one from the general diamond rank community will challenge you on this. I cannot speak for individuals, however. If you infringe on a diamond ranker’s personal interests, you might find them getting in your way.”

“Good to know, thank you.”

“Now, we should address some of the issues that stem from your particular situation. Every diamond ranker has their own circumstances, but yours are more drastic than most.”

“In that I’m not actually a diamond ranker.”

“Yes. You straddle the line between mortal and immortal. It is not our place to tell you not to intervene in mortal affairs while you are still a gold ranker. But we also won’t stand aside if you start intervening in mortal affairs using your far-from-mortal aspects.”

“Meaning that you’ll let me extort everyone with the System this one time, but I need to start using my big boy powers like a mature adult.”

“In short, yes. Handle mortal affairs like a mortal and immortal affairs like an immortal. That way, when some monarch asks us to rein you in, we’ll tell them no. And we expect the same consideration from you. Diamond rankers handle their own business amongst themselves. When we drag mortals into our affairs, or let them drag us into theirs, people die. Wars happen. Whole nations are wiped off the map.”

“Everything I’m scared of happening if I misuse my power.”

“Yes. Most of the diamond rankers you’ve met are young. Five centuries old at most. There are gold rankers older than most of them. Soramir Rimaros and Dawn are both exceptions, but both spend most of their time out in the cosmos. If you feel the need for

guidance on how to handle immortal power in a mortal world, I want to be available for you.”

“I’d like that.”

“All this being said, I’m not going to intervene in your business with the Cyrion noble houses. You made that mess on a mortal scale, and you’re expected to clean it up in the same way. No turning into a giant bird and wiping out entire families.”

“That wasn’t the plan, but I’ll keep it in mind.”

Vandrick stood up.

“I think this went well,” he said. “But that is ultimately up to you, and time will tell. If you need me, I’m confident you can find me easily enough. If you come looking for advice, I will be happy to offer it. If you come looking for help, you will find me less willing.”

Jason stood up and shook his hand.

“Understood.”