

## Chapter 644

### Distant Power

Within the relatively confined area of a city, swift travel was a simple matter for Jason. Being able to shadow jump respectable distances through Shade's bodies meant that Jason could deploy his familiar around the city and jump to those locations, sight unseen. Because of this ability, Jason had never gone the long way to the camping grounds just inside the city wall where merchants, adventuring teams and other travellers left their sizeable vehicles. In his brief visits to his team, he would slip in and out using a Shade body.

In the kitchen of Jason's hover yacht, he emerged from a Shade body to find Taika and Gary assembling a hillock of slices and pastries.

"That is not the basis for a healthy breakfast," he scolded.

"Bro, it has to be this way. Rufus threatened to cook again, and you were off making whoopee with twins. Congratulations on that, by the way."

Jason scowled and flung out his arm in an angry gesture. The floor opened up and Sophie passed up through it on a moving section of floor. She had a confused expression and a magically-enhanced dumbbell in one hand.

"Firstly," Jason said, "it wasn't twins. It was one woman who happens to have a twin. Her twin was not involved."

"I'm sorry bro. You must be disappointed."

"That I didn't lure sisters into sharing a sexual encounter with one another?" Jason asked. "That's not okay."

"Oh," Taika said, his brow creasing in thought. "It's kind of creepy when you think about it like that."

"It's extremely creepy when you think about it like that," Jason said before wheeling on Sophie. "What are you telling people?"

"What makes you think it was me?" she asked.

"Because you were there."

"So was Emir."

"We all have our flaws," Jason said. "I imagine that Emir's makes for a fascinating list that does not include a lack of gentlemanly decorum."

"What's he even doing Yaresh?" Neil asked, walking in with a dumbbell in his hand. "And why did Sophie just pass through my cabin?"

"Why weren't you wearing a shirt?" Sophie asked him.

“Because I was in my cabin. You dropped this, by the way.”

He tossed the dumbbell lightly through the air and Sophie staggered as she caught it. Unusually for a healer, one of Neil's elf abilities had evolved to give him strength akin to Gary.

"I think if we're going to discuss Emir's presence, we should include him in the conversation," Humphrey suggested as he also entered the kitchen. Being Jason's kitchen, it had plenty of room to accommodate the increasing population. "Also, Jason, what's this I hear about you making sisters do inappropriate things to one another?"

Jason turned a flat glare on Sophie.

\*\*\*

The camping grounds where Jason's cloud vessel was parked had a panoply of other vehicles occupying space. The magical vehicles varied widely in size, design and colour, with the result looking like a wizard shantytown.

Jason hadn't reconfigured the cloud vessel to a cloud palace form, despite the stationary nature of the team's current activities. It had a much larger footprint in that form, and he felt it would be obnoxious to take up even more of a space already crowded with vehicles. They already stood out enough with the hybrid cloud vehicle, although it was far from the only exotic means of transport on display. Jason especially admired an artificial beetle even larger than his own vehicle.

Emir did not share Jason's compunction about overt ostentation. His massive cloud palace required a large enough space that it had to go hard up against the city wall, some way from Jason's vehicle.

While Jason's cloud vessel had gone through extreme changes since Greenstone, Emir's was almost exactly as Jason remembered it. The only differences were minor ones, mostly around the base where it rested on land instead of sea. Emir's palace was larger than Jason's, even when it was on full display.

Emir's preferred design was five grandiose towers, topped by shimmering domes and connected by bridges. It made no attempt to hide its nature, and the cloud material it was made from flaunted brilliant sunset colours.

"I guess I don't need to ask where he parked," Jason said as he and Humphrey walked down a ramp from Jason's vessel. Emir's palace loomed over everything else in the grounds, even obscuring the wall behind it. They looked at the maze of vehicles between them and Emir's palace, then up.

“Fly?” Humphrey suggested.

“Fly,” Jason agreed.

Humphrey conjured his dragon wings, air surging as they launched him into the air.

"I shouldn't pull out the cloak," Jason said. "Let's just do a flight suit."

"Are you certain, Mr Asano?" Shade asked from Jason's shadow, his voice tinged with concern. Since leaving Earth behind Shade had not taken a single form based on the vehicles there, even when it was more convenient. Jason had never asked him to, either.

"It's fine," Jason said, not entirely convincingly, but darkness swirled from his shadow to surround him in a hover suit. Jason immediately thought back to his niece flying around over the water, giggling like a fool.

"Mr Asano?"

"It's fine," Jason repeated and took to the air, quickly catching Humphrey's slow progress. They weren't the only ones eschewing ground travel through the grounds and everyone was moving at respectful speeds.

"What is that thing?" Humphrey asked.

"It's something they make on Earth to let people fly without magic," Jason said.

"That works without magic?" Humphrey asked.

"Shade does the magic version," Jason said. "It's a lot more convenient and a lot less loud."

They passed over the grounds before arriving at the massive double doors to Emir's front tower, their flight aids disappearing as they landed. The doors opened up to reveal Emir standing behind them in a cavernous atrium.

"Hello boys," he said with a grin. "Come on in."

\*\*\*

"Has Arabelle spoken to you about Callum?" Jason asked Emir as they rode up an elevating platform.

"She's kept me apprised," Emir said. "I never realised he was already deeply involved when I invited him to join me in Greenstone. He's always kept so much hidden, even when we were at our closest. You're still deciding whether to give him access to Miss Wexler's mother?"

"Yes, although that comes down to what Sophie wants and Arabelle thinks is best. It's for them to decide, not me."

Emir nodded.

"I know that story. You get a cloud flask and start accumulating people, but you have to realise that your roof doesn't always mean your rules."

"He needed help to finally figure that out," a melodious voice said as the platform arrived at the top of the tower. Under the translucent dome was Emir's sprawling office of

mutable cloud furniture, subtly shaped to draw the eye to a massive desk at the back. Sitting behind it was Emir's chief of staff and now wife, Constance.

Emir and Constance had been moving around each other for years, but the power imbalance had sat between them like a wall. Not only was Emir her employer, but also gold rank to her silver. Over the years she had become more and more indispensable to Emir's operations, more partner than employee. Her ascension to gold rank had signalled the final boundary between them falling away and they married during Jason's time on Earth. She got up and moved across the room to meet them, looking contrite in front of Humphrey.

"I owe you and Sophie an apology, Master Geller. I genuinely believed that Callum was trying to protect you, not act on an agenda of his own."

Constance had been training with Callum to finally reach gold rank, returning just as Sophie and Humphrey discovered that Sophie's mother was still alive. Callum had let their best lead get away, ostensibly to shield them from dangers they were too low-rank to confront.

"Yes," Jason told her solemnly. "I hope you learned your lesson that teenagers are always right and you should let them do whatever they want."

Emir snorted a laugh as Constance shook her head and Humphrey gave Jason a flat look.

"Sophie is your age," he pointed out.

Jason frowned, looking Humphrey up and down.

"That's a good point," Jason said. "She's bit of a cradle-snatcher, isn't she?"

Constance gave Humphrey an amused smile.

"If it makes you feel any better," she said, "the difference between Emir and myself is more than the full age of either of you."

Jason and Humphrey both turned to give Emir disapproving looks.

"Oh, come on," he said. "I knew her for twelve years before anything happened."

"Humphrey," Jason said.

"Yes, Jason?"

"Does your world recognise and condemn the concept of grooming?"

"Yes, it does," Humphrey said.

"Now, that's not fair," Emir said jabbing a finger at them. "She was an adult when we met."

"Uh-huh," Jason said.

"I'm sure everything was fully completely legitimate," Humphrey unconvincingly added.,

Constance chuckled at Emir's scowl. He threw out an angry gesture and all the office's cloud furniture dissolved. It reconstituted around them as a series of comfortable chairs with a table in the middle. A hole opened up in the table and a drinks tray rose up, much as Sophie had done earlier in Jason's cloud vessel. They sat down around the table and Emir poured himself a glass of amber liquid as the others looked at him.

"I'm not sure that's what I'd go for this early in the morning," Jason said.

"The greatest joy of power," Emir told him, "is not having to conform to what anyone else wants from you."

"Put it away," Constance told him.

"Yes, dear," Emir said without missing a beat. The drinks tray, complete with Emir's poured drink, descended back into the cloud table that reformed over it.

"I think we should put aside the issue of Callum for the moment," Jason said. "As I said earlier, that is the decision of people not currently with us."

"Which leaves the question of what brought you here," Humphrey said. "I didn't think you'd be in the region for another week and a half."

"Once we heard that you were going after messengers," Emir said, "we felt that it was best to see you immediately."

"This is about the mysterious job you have for us?" Jason asked. "is it related to the Order of the Reaper?"

"No," Emir said. "That has taken on some complex and political elements that I am very wary of wading into. Especially until I figure out just how much trouble Callum's meddling has caused. For which reason, I would like access to both him and your prisoner, Melody Jain."

"Again, that's up to Sophie and Arabelle," Jason said. "I won't help or hinder you in that regard. But Sophie remembers that you gave her shelter when she needed it most. At the very least, she'll be willing to hear you out."

"I can't ask for more than that," Emir said, which prompted a cough from Constance.

"Well, I *won't* ask for more than that," he corrected. "What I will ask you for is help with something new. You may recall that the scythe that you, Jason, ultimately brought to me, was the culmination of a years-long search that involved dozens of teams contracted to search remote reaches and fallen ruins the world over."

"I do."

“I have something similar in the works. A treasure hunt for something even more elusive and valuable, with no idea where in the world it is.”

“Or if it even exists,” Constance added.

“It doesn’t matter whether it exists or not,” Emir said. “It matters if we get paid to look for it.”

“That sounds ethical,” Jason said.

“Being serious,” Constance said, “if this thing is real, then it could change the course of history.”

Jason went very still.

“No,” he said, his voice icy.

“Jason,” Emir said. “You don’t even—”

“I said no.”

Jason leaned forward in his chair, rubbing his face in his hands and then staring at his feet. His aura retracted until even Emir could barely sense it. Constance, who had only been gold rank for a couple of years, couldn’t detect his aura at all.

“Jason,” Emir said again. His voice reflected that he realised he’d stepped on a landmine. “Arabelle gave me some indication of what you’ve been through. She didn’t give me specifics, but instructed that I was, under no circumstances, to put you in the middle of important events. And I’m not. This is important, yes, but I’m only looking to put you at the periphery. You and your team will just be one set of adventurers amongst many. It’s how I operate. I hire teams of adventurers and send them out. It’s an ordinary job.”

Jason looked up at Emir, his eyes no longer masked by the magic coins Belinda gave him. It was the first time Emir had seen their true state, and though his senses didn’t pick up anything strange about them beyond their appearance, his instincts made him flinch. Jason’s expression was cold and his nebula-like eyes with their black sclera felt like a mercifully distant power in an unfathomable abyss. When he spoke, his voice was gravel being poured over a winter grave.

“An ordinary job?”

“Yes,” Emir said.

“Tell me.”