

## Chapter 697

### One Ludicrous Encounter to the Next

Jason dropped back to the floor, landing in a superhero crouch, then toppling over.

"Yep," he grunted, laying sprawled on the ground. "I'm pretty much spent. Hey, commander angel pants, what are you doing here? You know the diamond-rankers won't let you roam free in a bunker for long, right? You've kind of boxed yourself in."

One of the other gold-rank messengers moved closer to Marek and whispered, although silver-rank hearing meant that Jason heard it perfectly.

"Are you certain we should risk everything by betting on this... person?"

"We need something different, Payan," Marek told him. "He is different."

"I'm not sure that is the kind of different we want."

"It's the kind of different we have."

Marek floated over to Jason, looking down at him.

"We are wagering heavily on someone protecting us from them."

"Please tell me that someone isn't me."

"It is you."

"Then you may be out of luck unless both those diamond-rankers have a deathly vulnerability to snoring. It's really starting to feel like nap time."

Marek floated down until his feet touched the ground, then reached down to offer Jason his hand. Jason groaned, accepted it, and allowed the messenger to pull him to his feet. The messenger was a good two feet taller, forcing Jason to crane his head back to look at him.

"I pretty much get it," Jason said. "You're unhappy with your current astral king service and are looking to switch to a new provider."

"Your phrasing is unusual, but you have deduced the situation with accuracy."

"Then you're going to need quite the sales pitch, bloke. I'm not a fan of the Nazi-scientist deal."

"I would like nothing more than to sit down and discuss many things with you at length. Unfortunately, time is against us. This was not a move I anticipated making, and it is only a matter of time before my fellow messengers realise what we are doing."

Jason stood upright, his tired slouch vanishing and the expression on his face turning hard. He slid his sword into its scabbard before responding to the messenger.

"You being in a hurry doesn't change the fact that you came here to kill the people huddled at end of this room. It doesn't change the fact that good people died stopping you."

You saw what was left of this district after the monsters you sent were done with it. Even the ones that got out with their lives have had their homes and livelihoods destroyed. You came here for no other reason than to destroy. To sow fear and leave scars across the city that would remind the people here what it means to fight the messengers.”

“I was reserved in my actions. I think you know this.”

“Not out of any consideration for the people you were attacking. You think slaughter and destruction carried out with diffidence instead of enthusiasm means you aren’t responsible for the lives you’ve taken?”

“How many lives have you taken?”

“Plenty, and it’s messed me up pretty bad. I don’t imagine you lose a lot of sleep over it, though.”

“No,” Marek conceded. “I won’t pretend that I am something I’m not, but—”

Marek stopped as a chime sounded from each of the messengers present, including the unconscious Tera. Marek took a stone from a small pouch on his belt. It was strobing red.

“And our time is almost done,” Marek told Jason. “That is the signal for a general withdrawal. The attack on your city is over.”

“You think the defenders of this city will let you just waltz out? You can’t come and go as you please, killing whoever catches your eye. You think I’ll let you go?”

Marek’s gold-rank offside, Payan, floated up to them.

“You can barely stand and you think you can do anything to us? Any of us could kill you in an instant.”

“Go for it; I’ve been killed plenty. The Builder killed me. His prime vessel killed me. I imagine you’ve heard of Shako. Every time the Builder wants one thing and I want another, I get hurt or I get killed. But I get what I want, and he doesn’t. You think I’m scared of a few messengers? Why? Because you’re all standing in a triangle?”

The messengers floating in a wedge formation bristled but went still when Marek held up a hand.

“We have no time, Jason Asano,” Marek said. “I do not like to do it this way, but I will give you a simple choice. Your world has the concept of political asylum. I wish to claim it. I want to defect.”

“Leaving aside how much you know of my world,” Jason said, “you’re not talking about asking the city for asylum, are you? You’re asking me.”

“Only another astral king can harbour us.”

“Yeah. As it happens, I just found out why.”

Jason turned to glance at Tera Jun Casta, still sprawled unconscious on the ground. Marek followed his gaze and then narrowed his eyes as he peered at her.

“What did you do to her?”

Marek moved to her side in a blur of motion, kneeling to place a hand on her forehead.

“You know her?” Jason asked him.

“She was under my command, but no. You changed the astral king she belongs to.”

Marek stood, turned and looked over Jason with a freshly assessing gaze.

“What astral king does she belong to? It's not you; I could tell with both of you in front of me. But she does not belong to Vesta Carmis Zell anymore, either. I would feel it, the same connection I have. And how are you even both alive? She used a duelling power.”

“I thought you didn't have time for questions.”

Marek stood up, frowned, and then nodded.

“You are right; I do not. I need asylum, for myself and my people. I can promise you that there are benefits to be had for doing so.”

“I'm not looking for a bribe.”

“And I do not offer one. These are benefits you will want not for you, but for all the forces arrayed against my kind.”

“So, your pitch is that you'll do something super impressive if I take you in, but you don't have time to explain it right now.”

“The withdrawal has been called. If you will not accept us, we will have to leave before the city barrier closes. That will be bad for both of us.”

Jason sighed.

“Shade, thoughts?”

“He claims to need time, Mr Asano. You could offer him that, if you are willing to stand up to the diamond-rankers who will demand you hand them over. I think we both know that will not be a problem for you.”

Jason sighed again, then turned back to Marek.

“Give me one reason,” he said. “Not vague promises. Give me one good, solid reason that I should even entertain the idea of helping you.”

Marek paused for a long time, his expression thoughtful. Finally, his gaze came to rest on Tera Jun Casta, lying on the floor. He closed his eyes for a moment, opened them and then turned to Jason.

“Because you have chosen mercy,” he said.

Jason locked eyes with Marek for a long time, needing to crane his head back to do so. Then he turned, just as Mark had earlier, to contemplate Tera's prone form.

"Bloody hell," he muttered unhappily and a portal arch rose from the floor, filled with gold, silver and blue light. It started off human-sized, but grew to accommodate messengers at a gesture from Jason.

"You know where that goes, right?" Jason asked.

"Your astral kingdom."

"Get your people inside. It will keep everyone off you until we can have that long talk you mentioned."

Marek ordered his people in, the messengers looking decidedly uncertain but doing as they were told. More messengers came through to doors when Marek called them with his communication stone. They had been the ones blocking the hole in the bunker's ceiling against other intruders, and Jason's team was hot on their heels. They found Jason standing with Marek as the messengers filed through what the team recognised as a portal to Jason's astral realm. The team knew Jason in the middle of his latest insanity when they saw it, and since the messengers weren't attacking the civilians or Jason, they looked on warily from the door.

When Marek was the only one remaining, he turned to Jason.

"Do not leave us for long. Our current astral king will likely revoke our patronage, and that will kill us."

"I'm aware," Jason told him, the gestured at Tera. "Take her with you."

"She's knocked out. If she does not subconsciously consent to move through the portal, I can't."

"Then try. Or would you rather leave her to the mercies of my side, after what your side just did?"

Marek floated over to Tera, gently knelt down and picked her up. He moved back to the portal and they both disappeared into it.

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"You could have at least let me fight," Melody said to Sophie as she and Emir led her from Emir's cloud palace to Jason's. "I could have fought messengers."

"I wouldn't trust you to use your mouth when eating a sandwich," Sophie told her. "There's no way we would let you loose in a city-wide battle. How many times have I explained this in the last few weeks?"

"So why did it take so long to put me back in Asano's cloud palace? This man's is tedious."

"I have an extensive library."

"Asano has television. I've been learning the language of his world by watching stories about a man with a moustache and a sleek red carriage. The gold-ranker's palace lacks innovative amenities."

"That he lets you see," Emir said. "And the gold-ranker has a name."

"And if he also had a personality instead of colourful hair beads, someone might care," Melody told him.

Emir raised his hands to his bead-laced hair with a hurt expression.

"I like my hair beads."

"Be nice," Sophie admonished Melody.

"Of course, you like the boring guy," Melody said with a groan. "Are you still seeing that Lump guy?"

"It's Hump... it's Humphrey," Sophie said.

"I am not boring," Emir insisted. "In fact, you'll find that a great many people's most fervent wish is that I was more boring."

They approached Jason's cloud palace, which was once again set up to serve refugees. Instead of just the towns to the south, much of Yaresh's population was now homeless, making them refugees in their own city.

In the weeks following the battle of Yaresh, countless tons of rubble and ash had been collected and repurposed in construction projects that were rebuilding the city at a startling pace. Even so, tent cities still dominated, both inside and outside the city walls. Sophie, Emir and Melody had been walking through what amounted to a tent district that had grown up around all the parked adventurer vehicles, including Emir's and Jason's.

"You're going to see Jason?" Sophie asked Emir as they neared the entrance. They didn't pause in the doorway itself as there was a stream of people coming in and out.

"If he refuses to leave his soul space, or whatever he's calling it now, then I'll have to go see him."

"You're not going to try and get him to see the diamond-rankers are you?" Sophie asked. "They're the reason he's not coming out."

"Not the Yaresh diamond-rankers, no," Emir said. "There's another one that has come here to see him."

"Just don't cause him any trouble," Sophie warned. "Your wife still feels guilty about going along with..."

She glanced at her mother.

"...your old teammate. She'd be more than happy to do me a favour."

Emir held his hand up in surrender.

“No trouble for Jason,” he promised.

Sophie took her mother inside as Emir wandered over to a nondescript woman who was splitting her attention between the cloud palace and a cube-shaped device in her hands. She looked to be a well-preserved forty, although Emir knew she was many times older than that. He grinned as he saw the frustrated expression on her face.

“I see you’re still a woman,” he said by way of greeting.

“What? Oh, yes,” she said distractedly. “A couple of years, now. I’ve been thinking it’s time for a switch again. Not a man, though. Somewhere in the middle, I think. Young.”

Emir looked down at the device.

“No luck?”

“It works on yours.”

“Oh, I’m aware,” he said. “I was in the bath when you decided to return my palace to the cloud flask to make sure your override still worked.”

“I made the damn thing; of course I should be able to control it. What has this boy of yours done to his? I know I designed them to be adaptive, but this is outside all of the parameters I set.”

“I was about to go in and ask if he’d speak to you. He’s been dodging the local diamond-rankers, so he’s been reluctant to come out.”

“They’re diamond-rankers. Why don’t they just break in, if they’re that determined?”

“They did, after the first week. He’s retreated into a dimensional space.”

“You can force open dimensional spaces.”

“Not this one. The Builder tried, once, and even he couldn’t manage it.”

“Who is this boy?”

“Someone who has a habit of being the right person in the very wrong place.”

“Really? Did he start off ordinary and get caught up with something powerful? Properly powerful, I mean, not just some diamond-ranker.”

“Actually, yes.”

She made a sound of mild surprise.

“Fate senses, probably. That would explain the strange, disparate powers I’m reading from this cloud construct. You would have to go from one ludicrous encounter to the next.”

“That certainly describes Jason,” Emir said. “What are fate senses?”

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“Just the knowledge that it’s possible to survive without astral king patronage will be a revelation,” Marek said. “It is the fact that the kings are artificially limiting our advancement that will be the match that turns the Unorthodoxy from dead wood to raging inferno.”

“The Unorthodoxy,” Jason said. “That’s the messenger rebellion against astral kings you were talking about?”

He and the messenger sat on a long park bench in a wild garden of plants flowering vibrant red.

“It is far from a rebellion,” Marek said. “You cannot rebel against those without whom you will die. But what you’ve done for us shows that we can live without astral kings.”

“So long as you have an astral king to put your own brand in place,” Jason pointed out. “I’m not going to be your one-stop-shop for messenger refurbishment, if that is what you’re thinking. We both know that wouldn’t work.”

When Jason changed the brands on the souls of Marek and his people, it was not a smooth process. Opening up their souls to Jason was difficult for them, their unconscious reluctance overriding their conscious minds. In the end, only one had been unable to will themselves into opening their souls to Jason, and he had died several days after the astral king he previously served removed his own mark.

Even at the end, in the face of death, the messenger had not opened his soul. Marek had asked Jason how he did it with Tera and suggested he do the same, but Jason flatly refused. With Tera, he needed to save them both, and even then he still felt revulsion at the act. More than once in the subsequent week, he’d jerked awake from a flashback nightmare. As she was still to wake, there was no telling what trauma she had survived.

“I am not asking you to free more souls,” Marek said. “The first step must be showing my kind that it is possible. Then we can work at suborning astral kings. Those not on the Council of Kings won’t challenge the council under current conditions. If the messengers as a whole discover what the kings have been doing, that will change. I am certain that some will be willing to go along, if only to use the rebellion to build a power base the council cannot undermine.”

“That is your affair; I want no part of it.”

"I am surprised that you placed our own marks to free us, when you could have branded us with yours. We were in no position to argue. It was let you into our souls or die."

"I'm not taking anyone as a slave, no matter what they've done. I'll kill them if the consequences of leaving them alive are worse, but I won't enslave anyone. Again. It was strictly a one-time thing."

“Then you will let us leave?”

“Slavery is not an option. Imprisoning, I’m more open to. Being secrets rebels or whatever doesn’t absolve you of the things you’ve done. You may not care, but I do.”

“Then what will it take for you to release us?”

“I don’t know,” Jason admitted. “I’m not big on incarceration, either, if I’m being honest.”

“Letting us go is only good for your side. We will be undermining messenger power structures.”

“So you’ve told me. Repeatedly, and at length. I’ll continue to consider your arguments.”

Before Marek could answer, Jason was gone.