

Chapter 937

Take Things Slow

After collecting the people from Earth and turning his sky vessel back into a passenger ship, Jason and his companions set off for the next pick up. Most of the earthlings had been assigned to comfortable but basic dormitory lodging, with some attached activity areas.

“Mr Asano,” Shade said, after getting the new people settled. “The ship has more than enough room to give them individual cabins.”

“Yeah, but I’m a little worried about what happens if they’re all isolated. Plus, if they’re interacting, some of them might let something slip if they’re up to something.”

Having stepped up in the defence of the cloud city, Daryll and Koa had earned themselves cabins instead of being shoved in with the others. Jason was heading to the lounge bar to speak with them while Koa’s mother moved her things from the dormitory to the cabin suite she would now share with her son.

In the lounge with Jason, Danielle, Nik and Neil, the two earthlings told their stories. Daryll was from Far North Queensland, part of the Cabal faction monitoring the stone circle when it sucked everyone across worlds. Koa’s story was one of teenage rebellion and unfortunate timing.

“My mother worked for the Network,” he explained. “I was visiting her at your knock-off Stonehenge, where she was working. She told me not to sneak off to get a closer look at the thing, so I did it as soon as I had a chance. Of course, that had to be when it did the magic wibbly thing. The worst bit is that mum brings it up every time she thinks I’m not listening.”

“Once it became clear you wouldn’t be coming to deal with them yourself,” Danielle said, “I had Koa and his mother sent to Greenstone while we kept the other earthlings at our compound in Cyrion. He wasn’t quite old enough for essences, but he was close.”

“Mum works for the Gellers now,” Koa said. “She stayed in Greenstone until I became an adventurer, then moved to Cyrion.”

“He was starting his training just as I was finishing up,” Nik added.

“Koa,” Jason said grimly. “Just so you know, I’ve been in contact with Earth for a little while now. Before we head back there are some things you need to know about what happened to New Zealand. I want to prepare you for it now so it isn’t as much of a shock when we arrive.”

“What happened?” Koa asked.

Jason leaned forward in his chair, eyes filled with sympathy.

“New Zealand... got real bad at rugby.”

“What?”

“I know. There’s so many white dudes on the national team, they had to change the name from the All Blacks to the Semi-Blacks.

Koa gave Jason a flat look.

“I heard a lot of things about you, over the years. No one ever mentioned you were a giant prick.”

“You can’t have heard that much, then,” Neil muttered as Jason laughed.

Collecting the rest of the people from Earth proved less exciting than at the mountain city. The final location was in a vast flatland crossed by many waterways, known as the River Table. It had supposedly once been a mountain range, with stories of its levelling being many and varied. Most settled on either the wrath of the gods or a grand battle between diamond rankers, but neither the gods nor any diamond rankers had weighed in with an answer.

After arriving in the night and collecting the earthlings, the plan was shuffle everyone into Jason’s astral kingdom in the morning, then portal to Rimaros. Jason was walking though the cloud ship with Humphrey, discussing last-minute details.

“I think that’s everything,” Humphrey said. “On a side note, you might want to keep it quiet that your soul realm circumvents normal portal limitations. Do you have any idea how open to abuse that could be? Merchants would sell you their children for that.”

“I made a point of telling the Adventure Society, so I imagine word will get around. It’ll take a merchant with hefty nuggets to come around proposing a deal, though.”

“You told the Adventure Society?”

“We’ve already seen its usefulness for mass evacuations, with Boko and the brighthearts. The Adventure Society knows about those, but I wanted to make it clear that it’s an option if they need it for some fresh catastrophe. I’m not saying that I want a catastrophe to happen, but it would be nice if they had to call me in, instead of already being in the middle of it.”

Humphrey slapped a hand on Jason’s shoulder.

“It’s good that you let them know. Being there for people to rely on is what we do. But don’t forget that you need to rely on people as well, sometimes. I know that you have that vast cosmic power you’re always talking about.”

“Not *always*.”

“Sure. But remember that while you may be a big cosmic special man, you’re also still just a man. Who needs help sometimes.”

“Big cosmic special man?”

“It feels like you’re not focusing on the important parts of what I’m saying, Jason.”

“No, I get it. I’ve learned my lesson about going it alone.”

“Good. Now, I’m going to leave you alone. See you in the morning.”

Jason chuckled as his friend wandered off. Jason kept moving, riding an elevating platform to the bridge, then walking out and up some exterior stairs to the top deck. A cloud lounge rose from the deck and he fell into it, happily looking up at the night sky. Only one of the moons was visible, but it was full, turning the clouds into wisps of silver against the black. He luxuriated in the view and the quiet, halfway between meditation and a nap.

He was unsure how long he’d been there when Zara made her way up. The grace of her footfalls on the stairs made no sound, even to gold-rank hearing, but nothing was hidden from him within the cloud ship. He sensed the hesitant irregularity as she ascended the stairs; the tiny pause before she stepped onto the deck.

“It’s a beautiful night,” he said. “A river of silver, spilling across the sky. I’m glad that not every wonder needs magic to exist.”

“You’re on a flying ship made of clouds,” she pointed out.

“Well, some do need magic. That’s only fair.”

He sat up and turned to look at her, standing almost nervously at the top of the stairs. Many years ago, he had told her to change her hair from the famous sapphire of the Rimaros royal bloodline. Despite his having apologised for imposing on her body autonomy, she had hidden its true shade since, even in his long absence. Now it was back to sapphire, sparkling like gemstone threads in the moonlight. He wondered absently if she saw him freeze at the sight, then got to his feet with not quite the grace a gold ranker should have.

“You know,” he said, “everyone on this ship is an essence user, or magic in some way.”

“I know,” she said. “I’m not sure why you’re bringing it up.”

“No one on this ship is ugly, is what I’m saying. We’re all pretty to one degree or another, even if it does leave us looking annoyingly like our brothers.”

“I don’t think that’s a universally applicable observation.”

“Maybe not. My point, though, is that on a ship full of beautiful people, it’s hard for someone to be so stunning it seems like the god of low self-esteem put them here to make the rest of us feel bad. Is there a god of low self-esteem?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” she told him, snorting a little laugh. “Dark gods are tricky, so you can’t be sure, but I don’t think so. If there is, I don’t imagine it’s happy. It would have Despair, Misery and maybe even Pain bossing it around.”

“They do sound like bad bosses.”

She was wearing a white dress that starkly contrasted her hair in the moonlight. Her sapphire locks shimmered as she walked across the deck to stand in front of him. He had on a floral shirt and shorts.

“Hello,” she said with a nervous smile.

“G’day.”

Neither said anything else for a moment.

“I’m starting to feel underdressed,” he said finally, and a giggle burst out of her.

“You were wearing almost the exact same thing when we met.”

“Do you have any idea how nervous I was back then? I was avoiding... whoever that guy was, and I ducked into a random tent. Then, standing right in front of me, was the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“What about Sophie?”

“She’s gorgeous, don’t get me wrong, but we all have our own tastes. For one thing, the first time I saw her, she kicked me in the face immediately. Our relationship didn’t get any less complicated from there. Also, it’s possible I have a thing for blue hair.”

Her eyes narrowed as she looked at him.

“Is that why you told me to recolour my hair? Because it made it easier to stay angry at me?”

“No. Maybe. Shut up.”

She laughed again.

“You didn’t seem nervous, back then,” she told him.

“I was rambling like a fool.”

“You always ramble like a fool. You gave me a plate of confectionery slices and said I’d regret not taking you up on your dinner offer.”

“It has been pointed out, from time to time, that I might be a little bit arrogant.”

“You were right.”

"I'll take back the thing about being arrogant, then."

She shook her head in exasperation, but couldn't hide the smile teasing her lips. He stepped back, turning away and walking over to the deck railing. He leaned against it and looked up at the moon. She moved to join him, her hand almost touching his on the rail.

"You're putting an end to Zara Nareen," he said. "Princess Zara Rimaros is making her triumphant return."

"I don't know about triumphant, but it's time."

"Why?"

"I want the Storm Kingdom to be the first to eradicate indentured servitude laws."

He turned his head to look at her.

"Don't do this because of me."

"It's not about you," she said, keeping her eyes on the moon instead of looking back. "You know that what you did won't make anyone change, right?"

"I do. You can't impose real change, especially as an outsider. People have to want it. Be ready for it. Best case for me is that I inspire someone who can actually accomplish something."

She turned to look him straight in the eye.

"Oh. Wait, you said it wasn't about me."

"It's not. What you've done is something I can use as a pretence. Leverage. Too many times, I've taken drastic steps to get what I want, and reaped the consequences."

"Like trying to extort every nation on the planet into ending slavery?"

"Maybe not that drastic. You always have to do things a little bigger than everyone else, don't you? Or a lot bigger."

"It's an approach I've come to occasionally regret," he confessed.

"This time, I don't want to rush what I'm doing. No big, overt moves in service of quick results. I want to build the foundation of a movement. Move carefully and quietly to gather support. Show the people who think they have something to lose what they instead have to gain. Like being the only major nation on Pallimustus with full access to the System. Like an aristocracy that earns the respect of the populace instead of demanding it."

"You could abolish the aristocracy altogether."

"That would come under the heading of large, drastic moves. I need to take on a fight I at least have a chance of winning."

"I'm just saying."

"Well, don't. I'm already going to be accused of trying to end slavery as the first step in dissolving the legal standing of noble titles. Doesn't matter if it's true. Those who gain

money and power through exploitation aren't shy about lying and cheating to keep that power."

"That, I'm sadly aware of."

"And I meant it when I said this isn't about you. Yes, what you did has given me a chance to take this step. But what inspired me more than you has been the last fifteen years. While you were off fighting some cosmic battle, I've been with your team, out having adventures.

"Our team."

"Our team," she corrected. "You know that we're something of an oddity, amongst adventuring teams."

"Always have been."

"Humphrey and Sophie set the agenda, mostly. They had us picking up the contracts other people avoid. Helping towns and villages with no wealthy residents to add hefty bonuses. Neil too. I know how he comes off, but he has so much compassion under all of the... Neil. He's a priest of the Healer."

"I always thought the reason was that he stumbled into their booth at a jobs fair."

"You should be nicer to him," she chided. "But the team couldn't just be doing low-value contracts. Low paying for silver, anyway. Even basic silver contracts pay well, but running a silver-rank party isn't cheap."

She tapped the railing.

"Especially not when we don't have a free mobile base to operate out of. Lindy made sure we took enough jobs for the money. Humphrey and I might have family wealth, but at our rank, we're expected to add to it, not take it away. Pay for the next generation to enjoy the same advantages we did. And you should make enough money to have some fun along the way."

"If you can't enjoy life at silver rank, you're doing it wrong."

"Exactly. But the point is, we always had a focus on helping people. Zara Nareen saw a world that Zara Rimaros had always been shielded from. We've fought against outright slavery, and undermined indenture programs where the people were being exploited. Lindy and Stella got very good at that. But, satisfying as they were, those actions never brought real change. If anything, they only reinforced the same oppressive systems. We'd gotten rid of the bad apples, so people said everything would be fine, now."

"I'm familiar with that particular brand of context blindness."

"My reputation in the Storm Kingdom isn't the best. I did foolish things when I was younger, and that stain will follow me. But it will also cover me a little. People will dismiss

my efforts at the beginning, when they are most vulnerable to interference. They won't waste resources fighting me because they don't think I'll accomplish anything."

"I wouldn't bet against you."

"Yes, but your judgement is questionable."

He let out a mock-hurt chortle.

"You wound me, good lady. But I suspect you'll get more support than you expect, even if it's for reasons you won't like."

"What reasons are those?"

He took a deep breath and slowly let it out as he looked once more out at the night. Somewhere far below were the lights of a town they were passing over.

"There's a very famous legend back on Earth, that starts with three goddesses. They're arguing amongst themselves over who is the most beautiful, and for some reason decide to make some idiot prince the judge. They all try to bribe the guy, of course, because why pick a judge with integrity, and goddess of love promises him that the most beautiful woman in the world will fall in love with him."

"Gods can't do that. The soul barrier—"

"Will you just let me tell the story? I'm trying really hard here; I didn't even make an Orlando Bloom reference."

"Sorry."

"Where was I?"

"Goddess of love."

"Right. So, she bribes him with the most beautiful woman in the world, and he accepts because he's a sleazy turd. Soon, he finds himself on a diplomatic mission to another country and, wouldn't you know it, the queen just happens to be the most beautiful woman in the world. Long story short, she stows away with Prince Douche Canoe when he heads home, and her country starts a war to get her back. Since Prince Trust Fund's country is on an island, that means a massive naval force. And, to this day, we say that a woman with world-shaking beauty has a face to launch a thousand ships."

Zara gave Jason a long, assessing look.

"So, you're comparing me to the queen in this story?"

"That was the idea, yes."

"The Queen who gets mesmerised by a god, handed over to some man as a bribe and doesn't get to make any choices for herself. Anything done to or for her is just because she's pretty."

"Learn to take a compliment! I just compared you to Helen of Troy."

She put her hand over her mouth, which did nothing to stifle the giggles that crawled into his brain and hit a big button labelled YES PLEASE.

“Oh, you’re teasing me.”

“You’re fun to tease.”

“Oh, I’m fun to do all sorts of things to.”

The cold night air suddenly felt very warm, and they were very aware of how close they were standing.

“Uh,” Jason said, then pointed to the stairs. “I’m going to go. To bed. By myself. Uh, have a good...”

He gave up on trying to make words good and hurried away in a manner not at all suggestive of running away. He stopped at the top of the stairs, though, and looked back.

“You aren’t stopping in the Storm Kingdom full time, right? You’re staying with the team?”

“Yes. I’m going to plant some seeds while you and Clive build your magic bridge, and let them germinate while we’re on Earth.”

“Okay.”

“I told you that I’m going to take things slow.”

“Eminently sensible.”

“Not that you have to take *everything* slow.”

“Good night,” he said and rushed down the stairs.