

Chapter 894

Mandatory Team Activity

The subterranean border town of Outer Rexion was a ring of lights in the dark. Accommodation anywhere but the back tunnels was expensive by most standards, but gold rank adventurers had standards all of their own. Zara Nareen entered her suite and immediately spotted something different from when she left it. Someone had been in her room, despite explicit instructions to the contrary.

It was a multi-room suite, centred on two chairs and a couch set around a low table. There was something new on the table, but she didn't concentrate on that for the moment. Distracting her could easily be the plan, setting her up for an attack from behind. Instead, she pushed her magical perception out hard, in clear disregard of propriety.

She sensed no one else in the suite. She felt the agitation of those in the nearby rooms, but they were suppressing their anger. Social norms were all well and good, but no one wanted to bang on the gold-ranker's door and tell them to stop making a magical racket.

Zara took slow steps forward, looking around. If she couldn't sense anyone, either no one was there or the person there was very dangerous. She moved to the coffee table for a closer look at what had been left on it: a plate of red and white baked squares. Her shoulders slumped as the tension left her body. She smiled at a memory from half her lifetime ago.

"All these years and you're still barging in uninvited."

"I think 'barged' is a little harsh," Jason said as he stepped out of a corner shadow that should not have been able to hide a person. He shrugged off his cloak and it dissolved into nothing. Zara shook her head, picked up one of the slices and delicately bit off a corner. Then she elegantly lowered herself into an armchair as Jason dropped himself into the other like a sack of potatoes.

"I'm a little surprised you're the first one here," Jason told her. "I'm also a little surprised you're still turning your hair and eyes copper."

A contrite expression crossed his face.

"I had no right to tell you what to do with your body, even if my anger was justified. I'm sorry for that."

"We both made some bad choices back then. And you would have had to make fewer of them if I hadn't dragged you into my mess."

“Those are old stories, and these are new times,” Jason said. “Perhaps it’s time to let all that go. And it does look good on you, although I suspect most things do.”

“Are you flirting with me, Jason?”

“No, I just have eyes. Why are you still wearing a different colour?”

“The sapphire hair is iconic to the royal family. I’m still adopted into House Nareen, and it makes things easier.”

“Still publicly on the outs with the royal family?”

“No. Politics is more changeable than the sea and there has been plenty of time for that to blow over. But I like being part of my mother’s family, and staying there keeps me out of the worst of it. Especially since my cousin became the new Storm King. And my father has become softer since retirement. I was spending time with him in Rimaros when I was sent word you were back. That’s why I’m the first one here.”

They sat back in their armchairs, looking one another over. Neither of them had aged, of course. Zara knew that ranking up had changed little about her appearance, but Jason was a different story. His face had already changed a lot at silver rank, but his strange, nebulous eyes always drew the attention. Now he had the same eyes he had when they met at iron rank; dark, challenging and playful.

“Have your eyes changed back, or are they a disguise, like mine?”

“Just a disguise. How effective it will be, I’m not sure. I’m having trouble containing myself.”

“You always did.”

He flashed that infuriating impish grin. He was more handsome than when they’d met, yet still somewhat plain by gold rank standards. His chin was still somehow too prominent after ranking up no less than four times. It left his face oddly out of balance, yet it suited him perfectly. He always had a way of leaving her off balance as well.

More profound than the physical changes was the way his mental state affected his physicality. Back then he’d been twitchy, wild and energetic, as if he were hopped up on something. His body language was like a rabbit hopping on the spot, unsure whether to play or run away.

Now he was still. Certain. He looked at the world as if, whatever he decided, it was the world that would have to answer. Not many people recognised that look. Most never met a diamond ranker, let alone enough to know that they all had it. Zara was one of the few who did.

“Where did you get the ingredients?” she asked.

“The ingredients?”

“For the gem berry milt nut squares. We’re so far underground that the rock around us would be molten if not for the natural array,” she said. “The bronze rankers here have to wear specialised magic items just to survive.”

“I’m aware.”

“And you’ve been down here for what? A decade and a half?”

“About that.”

“So, where did you get gem berries and milk nuts to make this slice?”

She took another bite, then spoke with her mouth full in distinctly unladylike fashion.

“It tastes exactly the same!”

“That’s because it’s the same batch,” he told her.

She swallowed it all in a gulp, not carefully chewing as she had before.

“You fed me twenty-year-old baked goods?”

He reached for the plate.

“If you don’t want it…”

Jason’s hand was slapped away by a concentrated burst of compressed air that didn’t disturb anything else in the room. He leaned back, his grin somehow becoming even more smug.

“That was some precise wind control.”

“I did do a little practise on the way to gold rank, you know. I hate to break it to you, but time moves on while you’re off having cosmic adventures. The rest of us are living lives.”

She barely caught the flash of sadness before he reached out for the plate again. He took a slice and stuffed half of it in his mouth, waggling his eyebrows at her. But the mask had slipped a little, and didn’t quite fit anymore.

“It must be strange for you,” she said. “You go off and do these amazing things. Walking between worlds. But then you come back and everything has changed on you. Missing the lives of friends. Some girl you met once used your name, landing you in the middle of a political tangle you neither asked for nor deserved.”

“Why did you?” he asked. “I never cared to ask, back then, but why me? Like you said, we only ever met a few times. I’ll grant you, that first time it was memorable, but I was no one back then.”

“Do you really want me to answer that?”

“Should I?”

“No. I complicated things for you the last time you came back. I hope I’ve managed to learn better in all this time.”

She sighed and set her half-eaten slice down on the plate before leaning back and staring at Jason.

“You know I’ve been working with the team in your absence.”

“No you haven’t.”

Her eyebrows rose.

“You haven’t been working with the team, Zara; you’ve been in it. You’ve spent more time working with them than I have, even having scattered since reaching gold rank. You’re as much a part of the group as I am. Maybe even more so.”

Zara took a long breath and let it out slowly as she stared at Jason.

“It took me a long time to feel like I belonged,” she said. “Once I did, I felt an insecurity that maybe it was just in my head. That you would come back and kick me out. I asked to join you once before, and I know the circumstances were different, but I remember how angry you were. The way you looked at me.”

“I wasn’t angry at you, Zara. I was just angry.”

“It felt like you were angry at me.”

“Yeah, well, maybe a bit.”

“I don’t think I ever let go of that fear, not entirely. The way things ended with my last team...”

“Do you mind if I ask about them?”

“Rose retired. She works for the Adventure Society now. Orin is still adventuring. Hit gold rank not that long ago. He’s in a team with Kasper Irios and his friends. He’s—”

“The friend you invoked my name for so he didn’t get stuck marrying you.”

“Yes. Not my finest hour. It turns out my father was already working to... it doesn’t matter. Kasper is an adventurer, now, and Orin is the only one on his team to hit gold so far.”

“Amos Pensinata’s influence?”

“I don’t know. No one’s really seen him since the transformation zone. He was around for a little while, settling the affairs of Orin’s team. Then he just kind of vanished. Some people say he retired, others that he’s working on getting to diamond rank. He clearly wants to be left alone, so I never dug deeper.”

She sighed.

“I still think about my old team a lot. I wasn’t with them for all that long, but it felt like I was building a place to belong. They were a Rimaros team who trained the same way I did. We thought the same, tactically and strategically. It was different with your team.”

“*Our* team.”

“Our team. Thank you. They were still figuring things out when Sophie recruited me. Losing you, Taika and Rufus all at once left massive gaps in their tactical options. I felt like a stranger trying to fill three holes when I didn’t fit in any of them. They didn’t seem worried because the way they work is so adaptable, but that’s not the way we train in Rimaros. For a long time, I thought I’d made a mistake.”

“But not now.”

“No. When Sophie pulled me in, I felt bereft of purpose. She told me there are worse things you can dedicate a life to than helping people. It’s strange how you can dismiss an idea for seeming so simple and obvious. I’d convinced myself that I had to find something complicated and unexpected to set me on my life path. It’s why I went chasing you.”

“Just that?”

“I’ll ask again: do you really want me to answer that?”

“No,” he said. “Not today. Do you know when the others will get here?”

“Should be in the next few days. Travis will be soon, as he’s still working out of Rimaros. He’s been doing cloud flask research with House de Varco and that diamond ranker who hates you. The others are farther away, mostly Vitesse. Last I heard, Neil was in the Mirror Kingdom with Nik.”

Zara was startled at the smile that lit up Jason’s face.

“How’s my little rabbit guy doing? He must have found a team by now, right?”

“Actually, he’s been working with the Adventure Society. They shop him out for expeditions that could use a communications and coordination specialist. He’s in very high demand, from what I’ve heard.”

“That diamond ranker is going to come here, aren’t they?”

“I suspect so. They didn’t like you dodging them for fifteen years.”

“Are you using non-binary pronouns or did this diamond ranker split themselves into multiple people with magic?”

“Pronouns. High-ranking shape-shifters often switch around their gender. Travis introduced the concept of chosen pronouns and it’s catching on amongst gold and diamond rankers. Apparently. I don’t talk to that many diamond rankers.”

“See, this is favouritism. Knowledge wouldn’t let me go around disseminating ideas from Earth.”

“Only ones you didn’t understand for yourself. You introduced several concepts related to cooking that I did not impede at all.”

Zara looked around the room and saw nothing, but sensed a barely discernible divine aura. She looked to Jason, whose attempt at looking cranky was plainly undercut with amusement.

“Oh, look at this,” he complained to the room. “I’m out of my domain five minutes and already you’re eavesdropping.”

“Are you saying you never used your omniscience within your domain?” Knowledge asked.

“Yeah, well... shut up.”

After some disembodied laughter, the divine aura vanished. Zara stared as he shook his head in amusement, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

“Does that happen often?” she asked.

“You mean gods having a chat?”

“Yes.”

“I dunno. How much is often? I’m in the club now, so I imagine it’ll keep happening.”

“The club?”

“My membership is a bit odd. I’m not a god, obviously, but I’m not entirely... not a god, either.”

“You’re a demigod?”

“It’s more complicated than that. You want to see?”

“See what?”

He didn’t move. He stayed sitting where he was, eyes locked on her. His dark eyes gave way to the orange and blue ones, but there was no other visible change. At the same time, she felt the change, and she instinctively pushed back in her chair. Like a god’s aura, it was vast and connected to some distant force. It was as if he had become an unstable portal to some place of incomprehensible power.

And as suddenly as the sensation appeared, it vanished.

“What are you?” she asked breathlessly.

“Complicated. I’ll save the big explanations for when we’re all together. I’ll probably need Clive’s help explaining certain parts anyway.”

“Things are going to get strange, aren’t they?”

“Strange how?” Jason asked with unconvincing innocence.

“You know the Magic Society and Adventure Society are going to be all over you about this System thing.”

“I’m more worried about Clive, to be honest. How excited was he when it happened?”

“It’s probably best you don’t know.”

“That bad, huh?”

“I’m sure he won’t make a big deal of it,” Zara lied.

“I’d run off to the other universe without him, but I’ll need him to set that up.”

“The other universe. Where you’re from.”

“Yeah. I’ll be heading over there in not too long. You’re coming, right?”

“Can I?”

“Honestly, it’s probably not up to you. I’m guessing Hump will make it a mandatory team activity.”