

Chapter 634

Inventing a Man in Your Head

Rainforest encroached on both sides of the wide road leading off towards the elf city in the distance. Glass ziggurats and polished towers of dark metal poked up over the canopy, the elves having built their metropolis within the forest instead of clearing it to make room. Jason had been looking forward to exploring such a large city built into, rather than over the environment.

He had stopped outside the city first, having found a rare clearing by the side of the road. While other members of the convoy moved forward, he had loaded up his cloud flask with materials brought back from Rimaros. He was about to check the results when some members of the convoy came back from the city early, having acquired a new member.

Zara Rimaros was someone with whom Jason had a complicated history. They had met early in their adventuring careers, before the traumas that had come to define Jason. She had used his name, thinking him dead, for political purposes that complicated things for them both when he turned up alive. It embroiled him in machinations he had no interest in, at a time when he desperately needed to be left alone, eventually bringing him to the edge of breakdown.

For her, Jason's resurrection finalised a fall from grace that began when she used Jason's name in an ill-conceived attempt to help a friend. As the king's daughter, she had been in a prime position to vie for the crown of the Storm Kingdom, one of the most powerful nations in the world. Now that was never going to happen, and instead of Rimaros she had gone south alone, finding herself standing in front of Jason Asano once again, against his express desire to be done with the royal family.

Jason looked Zara up and down, his gaze lingering on her hair and eyes. As a celestine, hers matched, but the royal family's signature sapphire she once sported had become a milky teal. As Jason looked over her new look, the people around them watched as they stared at each other. The princess' return had come as most of the convoy was waiting on Jason to remake their mobile accommodations using the cloud flask. It was no secret that Zara had requested a place amongst them, or that Jason had refused, leaving her behind in Rimaros.

The people watching knew that Jason was still volatile, despite his ongoing mental recovery, and the tension was thick as both they and Zara waited for his reaction. They had felt the power and fury in the aura spike Jason had used to dismiss the team to which

she had attached herself as a pretence. As the moment dragged on in an increasingly weighty silence, Zara finally spoke up herself, launching into an explanation.

“You need to know that—”

“Copper,” he said, cutting her off.

“Copper?”

“Your hair and eyes. It will stand out less than the teal.”

“I’ve adopted into my mother’s family. This is their colouration.”

“I don’t care. Change it.”

A portal arch of white stone rose up from the ground, filling with rainbow light.

“Jason I—”

“My friends call me Jason, Princess.”

“I’m not a princess anymore. I’m Zara Nareen, now.”

“Then call me Mr Asano, Miss Nareen. Even better, don’t call me anything at all.”

Jason stepped through the portal to his soul space and the rainbow light flickered out, leaving the arch standing empty. The nearby cloud flask started spewing out cloud stuff as it began the process of forming a new vehicle.

There was an awkward atmosphere in the wake of Jason’s departure. Zara felt isolated and scrutinised as the assembled people split their attention between her and the cloud vessel taking shape nearby. Scrutiny was something she was very much used to as a princess of the Storm Kingdom, but she felt the absence of the usual support that role offered. She moved towards Jason’s team, who were not looking on her with kindly expressions.

“Keep walking lady,” one of them said. Zara knew from her investigations into Asano’s team that she was Belinda Callahan, a thief turned adventurer. Zara turned her gaze to Humphrey Geller, the team leader. He was someone she had met back in Greenstone and had the trained manners of high society.

“You heard her,” Humphrey said coldly. “You’d best join your new team, Miss Nareen.”

Zara moved to the vehicle into which her new team had gone. It was a large vehicle designed for overland travel as well as flight, with room enough for privacy. She was admitted by Korinne Pescos, who took her into a kitchenette with a dining booth. Zara sat down at an inviting gesture from Korinne, who started brewing tea.

“I think we need to have that longer talk now, Your Highness.”

“It’s not ‘Your Highness’ anymore, Lady Pescos. It’s Lady Nareen or, for preference, Zara.”

“I think you may have understated what Asano’s reaction would be, Zara. I always knew that there was history between you and him, but I never put much stock in rumours. I saw the two of you interact when we were all on that expedition together. It had the feel of a show to me; a political game your aunt concocted.”

“It was.”

“Then it’s time you told me the truth, if you genuinely want to be a part of this team. I welcome your presence, as do the others. Your wide-area damage specialisation is a good fit for our team and, princess or not, having you on the roster will open a lot of doors when we go back to Rimaros. Assuming you want to stay with us at that stage.”

Zara thought back to Asano’s team outside. The unified front they put on, defensive of their friend and teammate, resonated with her. Her political upbringing always upheld the idea of compromise with both allies and enemies, who could easily switch from one day to the next. The idea of genuine commitment felt forbidden and enticing.

“I’m looking for a place to belong,” she told Korinne, after thinking about it long enough that Korinne brought the tea and sat it on the table before sitting opposite Zara in the booth.

“Are you sure we’re not a way station until you can talk Asano around?” Korinne asked as she poured the tea. “I’m not saying that’s unacceptable, but I need to know where you stand in relation to my team.”

Zara nodded as she held her cup, waiting for it to cool. While it was hot outside, the temperature and humidity inside the vehicle had both been set low.

“Honestly,” she admitted, “I don’t know. Unless my rushed approach and less-than-terrific reception here didn’t make it clear, I’m somewhat floundering. I have to find something new. A new way to live my life.”

“And you think Asano is the answer? Are you in love with him?”

“No,” Zara said, shaking her head. “I’ve only ever met him a handful of times, which may be part of the problem. I’ll confess to a certain fascination, and the mysteries surrounding him is a big part of that. Perhaps if I knew him better I wouldn’t be so compelled.”

“You’re drawn to trouble.”

“No. Yes. I don’t know, probably. Have you ever felt completely lost, Lady Pescos?”

“Korinne. If you’re going to be in our team, you should call me Korinne. But no, sorry. I don’t think I can empathise. I’ve always known my direction, ever since I was a girl. Even through detours like this, it doesn’t derail me.”

“I remember that feeling,” Zara said with an envious smile. “That comforting certainty of where every foot forward was going to fall. I’ve been wondering a lot where I lost that, even though I knew the answer the whole time.”

“Oh?” Korinne prompted.

“It was my first time far from the Storm Kingdom. The other side of the world. My Aunt Vesper was the chaperone, but it was really me and some other iron-rankers from the Sapphire Crown guild. Royal guards my father assigned as a team, but not like yours. There was no camaraderie there. They were servants, but also minders. They weren’t even companions, let alone friends. I’ve never actually had a team.”

“So it’s true? You met Asano on the other side of the world and—”

“No,” Zara said. “I met him, yes, but only a couple of times. We certainly never...”

Zara smiled.

“I was girl. I don’t think I’d ever felt like one before. I was always a princess. And adventurer. A future leader. Then this man came bursting into my tent, all swagger and rakish charm. Exactly the kind of man my father would never let get anywhere near his precious daughters.”

“Your guards wouldn’t stand for that, surely?”

“They didn’t, but he was unfazed and I told them to stop. He had no idea who I was. It was the first time I’d ever been treated as anything but a princess. He was this wild, crazy man, a few years older. He gave me a plate of baked slices. My guards destroyed half of them testing for toxins. I’ll confess that my head was turned. Then I heard that he ran into me on his way to meet a whole group of gods, who had asked for him specifically.”

“Why?”

“It doesn’t matter. That just seems to be the circles he moves in.”

“That is an absurd thing to say.”

“He’s an absurd man. I saw him again, at a party, but nothing came of it. I’ve been trained my whole life to handle politics and relationships, so I was aware of what was driving my feelings. I kept my distance and returned to Rimaros. Then I heard that he died. After that, he occupied this strange place in my mind. Or a version of him did, anyway; one who was at least as much my own invention as true to the man.”

“It’s easy to idealise the dead. The living can never compete with a story in your head.”

“No, they can’t. When I came up with my terrible plan to get Kasper Irios out of our arranged marriage, I invoked Asano’s name, which was an idiotic thing. He just fit so well. There was so little information about him and he had died on the far side of the world, in a sufficiently heroic fashion to impress. He also had impressive connections, but no family. He was exactly what I needed in a dead fiancé.”

“And did you come up with this plan and he happened to fit, or did you come up with the plan because he fit? And which Asano was it? The real one or the one in your head?”

Zara let out a self-mocking chuckle.

“I think you know the answers, although I’d have denied it flatly at the time. Even to myself. Of course, it was a massive mess.”

“I remember. Royal scandals get around, although how much of it is true is a very different question.”

“It had all just about died down and my fake period of mourning was about to end,” Zara said. “That’s when he came back, but he came back different. Not like the way he was in my head, of course, but also not the way I knew him. The first time I saw him again was the day you first saw him as well.”

“The expedition.”

“When I met him, he was playful. Roguish. He was also ordinary in his power. But you saw what he was like that day. Angry, powerful.”

“He wasn’t powerful when you knew him?”

“No more than any capable adventurer. But you’ve felt what he’s like now. What he can do with his aura. And I’ve heard other things. Things I can’t talk about. And he certainly wasn’t playful. His anger at me was genuine, whatever political show we put on.”

“Why would he even agree to that?”

“Because of the damage my mistake would cause if he didn’t. Whatever his flaws, he’s a good man.”

“So you say.”

“Yes, I do say. I’ve looked into everything I can find about him, since he came back. And I could find more than most, as you’d imagine. There are sharp edges to him, but he’s a good man. Willing to sacrifice.”

“Are you sure you’re not inventing a man in your head again?”

“No,” Zara admitted. “I know that coming here was foolish. The attempts to rehabilitate my reputation were overtaken by events. The last hope I had was joining Asano as a royal liaison. He’s always in the middle of something, and if I could be a part of that...”

She shook her head.

“When I was rejected, I knew it was time to move on. I was the last person to accept that I was long out of contention to be the next Queen, but once I did, it was oddly freeing. Putting down a kingdom’s worth of responsibility opened a world of possibility. I adopted into my mother’s house to signal my withdrawal from the contest for the crown.”

“If you have a whole world of opportunity, what are you doing here?”

“You’re completely right,” Zara said, nodding her head. “This was a terrible choice. I should have run far from Rimaros and far from Asano to find... whatever it is I’m looking for. A new way to live, I guess. I have this idea in my head that Asano is at the centre of things in a way that might let me find it.”

Korinne shook her head.

“I do not see the appeal of that man.”

“That’s not what this is.”

Korinne drew a long breath and let it out slowly, then stood up.

“Temporary member or not, Princess, you’ll be valuable to our team. But you are in desperate need of getting your head straight, and that’s dangerous. There’s a healer in this convoy, who specialises in the mind. Seek her out. Until she tells me you’re up for it, you can travel with our team, but I won’t let you fight with it.”