

Chapter 717

Bad Influence

Like Jason, Emir had reclaimed his cloud palace as new buildings were swiftly fabricated in their place. As the area once used to hold visiting adventurer vehicles was being reclaimed by the city as they expanded their refugee and rehousing infrastructure, Emir had joined other adventurers in settling his vehicle outside the city walls. He chose a spot to the south not far from where the river emerged from the city, far enough from anything else that he could let it sprawl. The cloud palace took on its full form and size, primarily consisting of five massive towers. They made no attempt to hide their cloud nature and were stained in sunset colours of orange, yellow and teal.

On one of the many terraces adorning the palace towers, Arabelle looked out over the river. Before the attack on the city, the river had been lined with buildings that serviced the water trade and the people who plied it; warehouses, small docks, taverns and brothels. Left outside of the city defences, those buildings had been thoroughly annihilated. What little remained was nothing but flotsam, having become stuck to the river bank instead of drifting downriver like so much other debris.

“You look troubled,” Emir said, joining her in leaning against the rail. “I’m guessing that your talk with Jason did not precipitate him meeting with my increasingly impatient diamond-rank guest.”

“I’m surprised she didn’t just hunt him down herself. He hasn’t been hiding away in his special domain for a while.”

“She’s well-connected amongst diamond-rankers. I suspect she has a better understanding of who and what are standing behind Jason than we do. She’s being extremely careful about pushing him directly, although her patience is wearing thin without his cloud building to poke at.”

“Diamond-rankers aren’t used to waiting or being denied.”

“No. But the irritability of my guest is my problem. What is it that’s troubling you?”

Arabelle didn't answer immediately. She let herself indulge in the quiet moment with her old teammate as they looked out over the river, thick with debris still being flushed out of the city.

“I worry about Jason. About my ability to help him. I’m meant to be the one with all the answers, but his experiences are far outside of anything I’ve even heard of, let alone seen.”

"You seem to be doing well. Compared to what I heard of his early days in Rimaros, he seems not so removed from the boy I knew in Greenstone. More seasoned, more haunted. I've seen it, though. The sharp steel inside him that comes out a little easier than it should."

"I won't discuss the particulars, Emir, you know that."

Emir nodded.

"I'll leave you be," he said.

"I appreciate it. And don't be alarmed if you lose the ability to sense this part of the cloud palace for a little while. I'm expecting someone I can talk about it with."

"A divine visitation?"

"I'm a priestess, Emir; it's hardly out of the ordinary. The only reason the gods appearing to Jason is remarkable is that they don't make personal visitations in public or to non-clergy."

"That's a rather good reason, Belle."

Emir had not long gone when Healer manifested next to Arabelle. She pushed herself off the railing to stand up straight.

"Oh, don't do that on my account," Healer said, leaning himself. After a moment of hesitation, Arabelle returned to her original position next to him.

"I dislike this," he said, looking out at the debris-choked river. "The land needs healing."

"Houses count as part of the land?"

"Are the houses built on the river by elves that far removed from the dams built on the river by beavers?"

"What are beavers?"

"You've never seen them? They're an animal that builds dams. Jason Asano's world has them as well, so I'm told, but they only have one tail and don't shoot poison gas or venomous spines."

"Who told you that about Jason's world?"

"Travis Noble has a habit of talking non-stop when he's nervous. Gabrielle Pellin asks questions like the Knowledge priestess she is, and she is extremely pretty. The poor boy is helpless to the point that Guardian almost sent one of his priests to rescue the boy."

"Why didn't he?"

"I'm not entirely certain. Something the boy said about a little bit of peril."

"I have no idea what that means."

"I decided it was best to not enquire further for myself. Perhaps you could ask the young man with the garuda powers. He's from Asano's world as well."

"I should ask him and not Jason?"

"Jason Asano may be a bad influence."

"A bad influence how?"

"You presumed that I would show up."

"You did show up."

"Which is only going to encourage you, I know."

"I need to talk to someone. Carlos Quilido, Hana Shavar and Neil Devone all have too many biases for the objective perspective I need. I also don't want to share Jason's secrets, and I'm not convinced the healer's oath is enough that a stranger will remain silent."

"You don't trust the oaths my priests take? That you took?"

"You always see enforcement as a last resort, Lord Healer. Your oath is soft because you want people to do right because they choose to, not because they obey. I was in Greenstone. Neil Davone and Jory Tillman aside, the entire clergy was new because you cast out an entire city's worth of your priests for failing their oaths. If you punish people for spreading Jason's secrets that they heard from me, it does not retroactively stop those secrets from having been spilled. I am your priest, Lord Healer. I follow your belief in personal responsibility, but that means I am responsible for my choices. And for the secrets that those under my care have entrusted me with."

"Listen to yourself child. Hear the conviction. Do not doubt yourself or the guidance you give to those who need it. Not even as unusual a case as Jason Asano."

"I don't know that my guidance is enough. How do I lead him when I don't know the way?"

"Then don't lead him. Walk beside him, with a kind word."

"Metaphors are nice, but I need more than that. I need specifics."

"Then be specific."

"He's been getting better."

"And who defines better? He is different, but what makes one state superior to another? Who chooses that?"

"He does. He's getting closer to the person he wants to be."

Healer smiled.

"You fear he is backtracking."

“Regressive behaviour is a normal part of recovery,” Arabelle said. “My concern is that one of his negative behavioural triggers is being forced to endure the same patterns over and over. Or, more precisely, choosing to endure them. One of those patterns is being seen only by his rank when he is operating at a very different level, and this may be the most dangerous to him.”

“Oh?” Healer prompted neutrally.

“It’s at the core of the behavioural loop that took him to the state he asked me to help him escape. Jason acts out his principles. Often regardless of the cost. It was a defence mechanism he developed to cope with his arrival to our world. But he learned to temper that as that cost started to fall on others. He became able to yield when standing on his principles would cause more damage than they prevented.”

Arabelle glanced at her god, who for all the world looked like a friendly older man, patiently listening. No divine aura pounding at her senses, no smothering presence choking off her ability to think.

“Jason’s time on Earth brought these two factors into conflict,” she continued. “Time and again he faced gross betrayals from those he needed to work with. Time and again, he smothered his instinctive responses because retribution would have put his world in danger. Whatever else they may have been, they were the people responsible for shielding the world, so he tolerated actions that, in our world, any adventurer would have killed over. Eventually, Jason was pushed too far, too many times. His principles bent. He became more violent and less compassionate.”

She sighed.

“Which brings us to where we are now,” she continued. “Again he’s faced with the same pattern of people looking to use him in the belief that they can ignore any consequences because of his rank. I know the circumstances aren’t the same, but they are close enough that I have concerns. My encounter with him yesterday suggests that he’s done swallowing his responses. I think Dominion knows this, and that’s why he made an appearance.”

“You would presume to know a god’s motives?”

“I have no right to assert what they were, but I have every right to guess.”

“Bad influence.”

She couldn’t help but smile at the faint whiff of paternal indulgence, knowing that the god hadn’t let that scrap of his aura out by accident.

“I think Jason Asano is done being a silver-ranker,” she said. “I’m worried, both that he will undo the progress he’s made and of the damage he will do in the process.”

"Is that all that worries you?"

"My concern is that I may have even been the final weight that collapsed everything he and I have been building together. I conveyed Emir's latest request from someone very powerful who wants something from him. He left and the next thing I hear he's gone off on a spree of monster-hunting contracts. That's something he's always thrown himself into when he needs to vent negative emotions. He vents them into monsters."

Healer let out a chuckle.

"You think this is funny?"

"I think I don't care for one of my most capable servants miring herself in self-doubt."

Healer held out a hand, pointing to nothing out in front of them. Arabelle then spotted a patch of darkness emerge from the shadow of a tree that had been snapped in half, not far from the palace. The shadow moved through the air in a blur until it floated in front of Healer's hand. The shadowy mass resolved itself into the shape of a person, the dark parts highlighted with white to resemble some of the formalwear she had seen Jason wear.

"Might I have an explanation of this indecorous behaviour, Lord Healer?" Shade asked.

"I need to look in on your contractor."

"Might I suggest following that by looking in on an etiquette tutor?"

"What is it that Jason Asano does to people that makes them so willing to disrespect power?" Healer asked.

"He looks at that power," Shade said, "and asks if its behaviour is deserving of respect. Or, if it instead grabs people and leaves them dangling in the air to use as a scrying tool."

"A not inconsequential point," Healer acknowledged. "Still, damage done, so I may as well go ahead."

Shade turned back into a mass of shadow that then took the form of a ring, like a portal. An image appeared in the ring of Jason at what looked like a village street stall, jiggling a pan over an open flame.

"Can he see and hear us?" Arabelle asked.

"No," Healer said as they listened to Jason speak.

"...haven't managed to find potatoes," he was explaining to a handful of elves gathered around him. "Potatoes are — okay, now that I think about it, it doesn't matter what potatoes are. The point is that ibrilim powder serves much the same purpose as potato starch and I just realised I should never have brought up potatoes at all. Anyway,

the powder will thicken the sauce, but be patient and give it time to do its work. Don't just keep pouring it in or it'll keep thickening and your brown sauce will turn into brown mud. This is something you'll need to develop from experience, as how much powder to use is always a judgement call..."

Jason trailed off and peered up at the ring, narrowing his eyes.

"Shade?" he asked. "I don't know who is messing with my familiar, but you'd best knock it off or I'm coming for you."

"It is I, Jason Asano," Healer said. The people around Jason dropped to their knees.

"My point stands," Jason said, "and if you keep distracting me it'll ruin my sauce. Let go of my friend or I'll start visiting your priests for purposes they aren't going to approve of."

The people around Jason went from kneeling to sprinting away.

"You would interfere with the good work my people do?" Healer asked. "You would go to war with a god?"

"Mate, I was killing priests of Purity before it was cool. I know you're a generally okay bloke, but being a god doesn't give you a pass to be a turd. You let my guy go and I'll let it slide. This time. I don't know what point you're trying to make with this little display of provocation, or who you're trying to make it to, but let Shade go and sod off or you and me have a problem."

The ring vanished and turned back into a shadow mass. It then burst like a dark firework as Shade destroyed his body.

"Did you see his reaction?" Healer said.

"Where you provoked my friend and he threatened my god? Yes, I saw Lord Healer."

"Calm yourself, child, and look deeper. What Jason Asano demonstrated was balance. An odd balance, yes, but he is stronger than he was before. Less likely to lose himself. You helped him find the place he is now, but the journey never ends. You know that. Have faith in yourself and your abilities as a healer."

"He just threatened a god!"

"And a year ago, he'd have been tearing through one of my churches by now. Do you consider threatening a god to be out of character for him?"

"No," Arabelle grudgingly acknowledged. "I suspect that it's kind of his thing."