

Chapter 699

Aftermath

Messengers didn't dream. They understood the concept, but it wasn't something they experienced for themselves. It was a condition of lesser beings. Of the weak. This was what the messenger Tera Jun Casta had been told her entire life, which left her confused as she roused from dreams of her own. She didn't remember them, skittering away like spectres in the night, but it felt like she had been living them for an extremely long time.

She opened her eyes to see an unfamiliar ceiling. It was dark crystal with swirling gold, silver and blue sparks within as if filled with viscous fluid and expensive glitter. She was in a bed made of fluffy white cloud-material, which was comfortable with her wings. Her armour, once torn to shreds, was now whole.

There was no sign at all, in fact, of the fight that was the last thing she remembered. Her armour was repaired and the injuries were gone, as was the blood they had painted her with. What remained was the bitter sense of defeat, not in that she had lost the fight but that she had accepted the loss before the fight was over. Her thoughts had turned, in desperation, to using the people in the bunker as hostages. The soul barriers around her and Asano would have killed any normal-rankers they touched.

Thinking of her power spiked her confusion. Once her power was enacted, either one or both people would die. Yet here she was, and Asano's survival was obvious. She could sense the singular will dominating her surroundings; the aura that pervaded every scrap of matter. It was an astral kingdom, and while this was only her second time being inside one, there was no mistaking it. There was also no mistaking who it belonged to. She instinctively knew it was Jason Asano, the man she did not even remember losing to, and her certainty went beyond just recognising the aura. She felt a familiarity with Asano that she could not explain but felt unsettlingly intimate.

She had no idea how the fight had ended. She had flashes that didn't make any sense, as fleeting as the remnants of her newfound dreams. She needed more information and sat up, shifting her legs off the bed. The cloud bed accommodated her, altering itself as if in response to her desire and transforming into a chair. She remained seated for the moment and looked around.

The room she was in was large, more a luxurious suite than the cell she would have expected. The furniture varied from elegant wood to plush cloud-material, and it was very spacious. There was a low set of drawers against the wall, atop which was what looked to

be an array of baked goods on plates under glass display domes. The windows showed gardens outside, with blood-red flowers on thorny green stems.

There were two ways out; doorways with no doors, but only veils of mist. One was in the wall and the other was a circle occupying the ceiling in the style of messenger architecture. The room did not seem at all designed to keep her contained, but she realised it didn't need to. There was no escaping an astral kingdom; you stayed until the king allowed you to leave. Perhaps there was some leeway, given that Asano was only silver-rank, but she doubted it. Even a gold-rank fish was not mightier than the silver-rank ocean in which it swam.

How she ended up in an astral kingdom without consenting to pass through the portal she did not know, and that was just the beginning of her confusion. She felt different, unsure how long she had been unconscious. She was about to assess herself with her senses when a voice came down through the door in the ceiling.

"Tera Jun Casta," the male voice called out. "I am told that you are awake."

It wasn't Asano's voice, but she thought she recognised it. Her senses failed to escape the walls to probe further.

"Who are you?" she called out.

"Marek Nior Vargas."

The commander. Tera was only a loose addition to the forces Marek commanded in the raid on Yaresh, and not one that would garner the commander's individual attention. Messengers unable to advance beyond silver were to be pitied, with only everything in the cosmos other than messengers being more lowly.

Tera realised that she was caught up in her thoughts and had not responded.

"Commander," she said, looking up at the misty ceiling. Through it, she could only see a winged silhouette. "I do not know how to let you in. Or if I can get out."

"Do I have permission to enter?" he asked, startling her.

"You don't have to ask, Commander."

He descended through the veil slowly as she stood up, hovering just off the floor. She noted that he didn't remain floating, his feet settling on the floor. He was wearing light armour like her and stood slightly shorter, especially as she was floating in the air. His wings with their subdued plumage folded tight on his back as he looked at her with eyes as sharp as his handsome features.

She knew him only by reputation and what she had seen in battle herself. In both cases, protectiveness was his most well-known trait, followed by careful tactics and

conservative strategies, contrasted with sudden moments of bold action. Many counted him as an ideal messenger, while others considered him fearful and weak.

During the raid, Tera had seen for herself as Marek prioritised keeping not just his own troop safe but all the messengers under his command as well. She felt the sting of shame as she remembered throwing away his efforts and charging after Asano in a reckless fervour. If he was here with her, he most likely had placed himself in danger to protect the many who, like her, had disobeyed his orders.

“You were captured as well,” she said sadly. To her surprise, an awkward smile crossed his face that shattered the image of stern commander and showed the man behind it.

“It’s complicated,” he said. “A lot has happened, and I imagine your memories of the battle’s end are scattered at best.”

Tera nodded.

“I have many questions, Commander, but there is no need for you to—”

“Waking up in this place must be disorienting, and there is much you have yet to understand. Even about yourself, I see. Come fly with me, Tera Jun Casta.”

Without waiting for a response, he floated up through the misty door. As she pushed more strength into her aura to lift herself, she discovered that more than simply feeling strange after awakening, her aura had undergone a permanent change. Startled, she dropped to the floor.

“Do not rush,” Marek’s voice came from outside. “You have only just awoken from a lengthy slumber to find everything has changed. We have an abundance of time, so take as much of it as you need.”

“I cannot make you wait on me, Commander.”

“Yes, you can. Look inward before you look out, Tera Jun Casta. That’s an order. I will be here for your questions when you are done.”

“Jason,” Humphrey said, “the longer you refuse to meet with the diamond-rankers and the Adventure Society, the worse they are going to make things for you once you do finally leave your soul realm.”

Humphrey and Jason were sitting on lawn chairs, taking drinks. Amongst the gardens sprawled around them, Rufus and Sophie were sparring with a half-dozen copies of Jason. More copies of Jason were duelling one another, floating in cross-legged meditation, reading or going through dance-like weapon forms.

"Humphrey, they broke into my home, rummaged through for the things they wanted and left. They may have only taken Taika's imprisoned messenger, but if any of us had been there, they would have taken them as well. Most likely Sophie's mother, too, if it had come to that. And the cloud palace is a hospital, for the moment. They were highly disruptive."

"I'm not denying you hold the moral high ground, Jason," Humphrey told him. "They should never have barged into the cloud palace. And I know that flaunting political reality is kind of your thing. But I'm asking you to think back to what that has gotten you over the years, and what it will get us all in the years to come. I don't want the Adventure Society giving us problems every day until we reach gold-rank."

Jason nodded.

"I still let my pride get the better of me, don't I?" he asked. "But I'm going back out today. It would appear the Adventure Society here have taken the same approach as the Rimaros branch did to my seclusion. They found an ambassador."

"They used Rick in Rimaros," Humphrey said. "Who are they sending to talk to you here?"

Jason's eyes sparkled.

"Rick again. The locals lack imagination, it would seem."

"Rick went north after the monster surge."

"And I sensed them portal him in less than an hour ago."

Humphrey let out a sigh.

Marek waited in the shadow of the massive dome containing the cocoon that loomed taller than most of the buildings in Asano's astral kingdom. In the weeks he had been present, the cocoon building had, like much of the territory, undergone large changes. Sometimes he watched them, sometimes he didn't perceive them at all, as if time had skipped and suddenly a building was gone. Asano's realm was in a constant state of flux, with only a handful of places remaining static. The pagoda tower at the centre was one, as was the forge where the leonid, Gary, practised his weapon-smithing.

Marek had given the man a wide berth as he was not friendly to the messengers. He had killed no small number of Marek's kind during the raid and seen them kill civilians in turn. One of Marek's people had let pride rule his head and accosted the leonid, only surviving through Asano all but rebuilding his body from scratch.

Marek's most unruly subordinate was Mari Gah Rahnd, and Marek tried to find her before she went after the leonid for fun. Asano, inevitably, found her first, delivering her to

Marek to look after. A few days later, Asano gave her mouth, arms, legs and wings back to her.

Asano seemed to have an astral king's instinctive understanding of how messengers worked, the punishment he delivered was exactly what Marek would expect from any astral king. Asano could remould their bodies despite not being one of them, or even a complete astral king. He lacked the third part of the astral throne, astral gate and soul forge trifecta, an absence that got Marek thinking.

The astral king Marek had, until recently, served was Vesta Carmis Zell. Marek did not know her exact agenda, but he could make certain guesses. Zell was known for her fascination with soul engineering. It was an uncommon practice as tools were almost impossible to find and raw materials even more so. She and her chief agent, Jes Fin Kaal, were after something deep underground, and a soul forge would explain the absurd resources expended to obtain it. Marek was no soul engineer himself, but he knew that a second forge was something that astral kings who were deeply coveted.

Marek shook his head, clearing out his latest postulation. With little to do for weeks, his mind was running through one possibility after another, Without the power to leave, he neither had nor could obtain the evidence to confirm or disconfirm any of them. He was better off planning what he and his people would do once Asano let them go. He was confident now that Asano wouldn't just hand them over to the Adventure Society, although that wasn't the same as releasing them.

Marek watched as the cocoon dome started rising from the ground, revealing itself as a giant sphere that floated away through the sky. He wondered how much the shifting nature of the space was due to Asano's proclivities and how much was instability from his lack of a soul forge.

He was still watching it when Tera rose through the misty door, her expression a mix of concern, confusion and the tiniest bit of hope.

Rick and his team were sobered by the aftermath of the Battle of Yaresh as they flew over the city. They were riding in an open-top flying carriage as blackened flatland passed under them. Magic could rebuild destroyed infrastructure with startling speed, so the city being little more than rubble two weeks after the battle told a bleak story. Only tiny pockets of reconstruction were scattered across the city, the beginnings of what would come next. Given that Yaresh had been a city where most of the buildings had been made through the shaping of living trees, it would be a lengthy process of recovery. A few trees were already starting to grow in the bleak landscape, but there was such a long way to go.

In most places, recovery meant clearing enough room for whole districts of temporary housing, be it tents or rough buildings shaped with hasty magic. These places hadn't even started recovery, simply being attempts to survive.

"Most of the population is still living in the bunkers," Vidal Ladiv explained. He was the Adventure Society's official liaison with Team Biscuit, although he always seemed to find himself conveniently forgotten. Attached to the team in Rimaros, he had been 'accidentally' left behind in no less than three towns between Rimaros and Yaresh.

During the raid, Vidal had not been fighting with Jason and the others but evacuating people from the riverside districts. His water essence and expertise in administration and logistics had made him a valuable asset there, although he couldn't help but feel fobbed-off again.

The local Adventure Society had not been happy with Vidal's inability to get Jason to fall in line, although the letter he showed the local branch director had helped. Signed by both the Rimaros branch director and Soramir Rimaros himself, it detailed some of the difficulties in dealing with Jason Asano and suggestions against provoking him.

It didn't entirely surprise Vidal when the diamond-rankers ignored this and smashed their way into Asano's cloud palace, coming out with only one messenger and a raft of complaints. With the Church of the Healer and other organisations using the building as a hospital at the time, this inevitably led to formal protests to the Adventure Society about diamond-rankers causing chaos.

They rode through the air in silence, Rick and his team looking out in dismay. The area that had once been a giant parking lot for adventurers' vehicles was one of the more intact zones in the city, behind only key infrastructure that had secondary defence systems. Those additional defences were how the Adventure Society and Magic Society campuses, along with the ducal palace, all remained essentially intact.

The area with the adventurer vehicles did have one bombed-out area, where the original refugee camp had been. People evacuated from towns to the south overrun by worms had stayed there until the attack on the city, at which point they had bunkered down in Jason and Emir's cloud palaces. Now that area was once again covered in tents. As for the vehicles themselves, many showed scars from the messenger raids, but the district had held out, fending off the messengers.

"We're confident that the diamond-rankers won't go barging into the cloud palace again, the moment you leave your soul realm?" Neil asked Jason.

They were standing in a courtyard near the central pagoda of Jason's soul realm. Along with Humphrey and Sophie, the four of them were the greeting party for Rick and his team.

"They won't," Humphrey said. "Even if diamond-rankers don't need to care what people think of them, they still do. They operate in this city, and while they can endure a bad reputation, it complicates things for them. Not only is going after a silver-ranker a second time heavy-handed but it means that they didn't get what they wanted the last time they went after him. Going in again makes them look both tyrannical and weak at the same time."

Jason opened a portal to the world outside and they stepped through.

Jason's cloud palace was buzzing with activity as the carriage set down on the roof. The roof itself was clear but looking over the roof's edge they saw people filing in and out of the building. Once they took the elevating platform inside they found a hubbub of chaos barely kept in order by a panoply of clergy and Asano's spooky one-eyed avatars, looking like alien creatures draped in void cloaks.

"Asano's cloud palace was used as a hospital after the attack and still is," Vidal explained as they shouldered their way through a crowded hallway. "But now it serves more as a processing centre. We make sure that everyone gets a hot shower and a hot meal before going to their assigned accommodation, which is usually just a tent or a stone-shaped building or the like. We also make sure that no unpleasant surprises have been left behind inside people. We were in the midst of dealing with body-controlling parasites when the attack began."

Vidal led them to a lounge room that was only medium-sized, but they had seen the premium on space in the building. Shortly after they arrived, a portal opened up to admit Jason, Humphrey, Sophie and Neil.

Greetings were made all around. Neil and Dustin from Rick's team were childhood friends. Phoebe had been instrumental in Sophie's initial training back in Greenstone, both of them being pugilists. She also hadn't seen Jason since Greenstone, as she'd been occupied when Rick's team travelled to Rimaros. As for Rick himself, he was looking around as if something was missing.

"What's wrong?" Jason asked him.

"Where's the small army of beautiful women?"

"What are you talking about?" Jason asked as Rick's team member and girlfriend Hannah thumped him on the bicep.

"It's a little strange not seeing you surrounded by gorgeous women."

"Well, there's Sophie, Phoebe and the lovely Adeah twins," Jason said. "Is that not enough for you?"

"Yes, Rickard," Hannah said in a voice sharp enough to slice vegetables. "Is that not enough."

"I'm just saying that there's usually a gaggle of women I've never seen before when I see you."

Jason shook his head.

"Rick, you need to get over this. I'm not always..."

Jason trailed off, turning to frown at the door.

"Yeah, I have to pop out real quick," he said as Shade rose from his shadow for Jason to step into and vanish."

"The diamond-rankers again?" Humphrey guessed.

"No," Neil said, walking over to the door. "He'd have gone back to his soul realm if it was that."

There was a knock at the door and Neil opened it. On the other side was a priestess in the full robes of the Church of Fertility, with a cluster of young female acolytes behind her.

"Sorry," she said. "My god told me that Jason Asano was in here."

Chapter 700

Harder Than They Have to Be

“He said no,” Taika told the Fertility priestess firmly.

“Mr Asano represents an unusual confluence of factors that could potentially be used to produce powerful forces that can be deployed against messengers and similar threats.”

“I’m pretty sure you shouldn’t be trying to breed super-soldier armies. That sounds like some creepy eugenics stuff.”

The priestess gave Taika’s mountainous body an assessing look up and down.

“You’re an outworlder as well, aren’t you?”

“I have to go.”

Taika vanished through a mist door, leaving the priestess alone with her acolytes.

“Uh, Priestess Hennith?”

“Yes, Acolyte Fennick?”

“I thought we were just here to deliver food.”

“These are difficult and busy times, acolyte. It pays to grab any opportunity you can get.”

“Is adding this man Asano to the breeding program really an opportunity worth chasing?”

“While the goddess does want samples, it’s not of any great importance, no. But the goddess wants the man’s goodwill, which we apparently fostered by arriving exactly when and where we did. I have no idea how that works, but that’s why we have faith, Fennick dear.”

“Why would the goddess want the goodwill of some mortal?” another acolyte asked. “And even if she does, why not just show him even the barest favour? What mortal would not be honoured by that?”

“I think we may need to get you out of the temple more often, Acolyte Cassa.”

The image of Marek and Tera sitting on the roof of a building was not the standard to which messengers typically held themselves. Messengers conceived themselves as higher beings, their tendency to float over the ground instead of walking on it a message that the ground-dwellers were both literally and figuratively below them.

Messengers also favoured diaphanous clothing that lend them an ethereal air, while Marek and Tera wore what looked like simple leather armour. In reality, it was a magical synthetic with the physical integrity to endure through most battles of the material's rank.

Only after an extended battle with Jason had Tera's armour turned ragged, although she found it repaired when she awoke. Asano could easily do so, here, and her cloud bed had kept her clean during what she now knew to be weeks of sleep.

Tera's senses were still exploring her body and soul, coming to grips with the changes. The most central elements of her identity had been altered and she was still processing the ramifications. She sat slumped on the sloped roof of the building, head bowed.

Marek, sitting beside her, looked on with concern while not knowing what to say. His current incarceration aside, freedom from astral kings was what he had always hoped for and never believed possible. But he had spent far longer than Tera's entire life working his way free of the conditioning every messenger was put through. For him, what Asano had done was a gift.

He knew that Tera was in a very different place. The indoctrination new messengers went through was not only still very much in effect for her but the very pillar of her identity. She was a loyal servant whose potential would never amount to more than what she was. At most, she could have hoped to find an astral king that would let her become a Voice of the Will and surpass her silver-rank limits.

Now, that limit was gone. The mark of the astral king that held her loyalty was gone too. For Marek, those absences were everything he ever wanted, not just for himself but for his people. He understood that Tera's entire world had fallen away, leaving her adrift. Added to the lingering trauma of how Asano forced her to open her soul, she had many issues to work through.

It was Marek's intention to bring that same freedom to all the messengers, but Tera had shown him that it was even more complicated than he had imagined. He was certain that, with time and care, Tera would realise how great Asano's gift was. But left to their own devices, many messengers would immediately surrender their freedom all over again.

It wasn't a simple path that Marek had ahead of him, even assuming that Asano let them go. He had a good sense of the man, having lived inside his soul for weeks, but what he had learned left him uncertain. While Asano was clearly trying to step back into the light, many dark corners remained in his astral kingdom.

"What..."

Tera's voice was hesitant after sitting in silence for so long.

"What do I do, now? Who am I?"

"That's for you to decide," Marek told her. "I know that's going to be hard when you've spent your entire life having other people tell you exactly who and what you are."

She turned to look at him, her eyes hollow and lost.

“He did to you what he did to me, didn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“Why aren’t you as lost as I am?”

“Because I long ago came to desire what Asano has given us. I just didn’t realise it was possible.”

Her eyes narrowed, her previous deference replaced with suspicion.

“You’re part of the Unorthodoxy, aren’t you.”

“Yes,” he admitted.

“Traitor,” she accused.

“Yes,” he admitted freely. “And you will be marked the same, should the astral kings find out what we are.”

“And what are we?”

“Free. Free of their influence and free of their limitations. They cannot tolerate even the possibility of that or everything about our society will crumble. You were not restricted to silver-rank by some inherent defect, Tera Jun Casta. Vesta Carmis Zell was using you as a power source, sapping away your potential.”

“You think I haven’t been warned about Unorthodoxy lies?”

“I’m quite certain you have, but what we are isn’t something the Unorthodoxy revealed to me. It’s a truth I have only now come to realise, and that same truth is inside your own soul. However much you might deny it, you are the proof.”

“Asano forced me to let him into my soul.”

“Yes.”

“He poisoned me. His very existence is heresy.”

“Look at your word choice, Tera Jun Casta. That is a word of the gods, and we both know what you have been taught about faith. What does that say about what you believe?”

Tera floated off the roof, hovering in the air as she looked down at Marek.

“You can try all the verbal tricks you want, traitor. Once I find my way out of here, I’ll return to the astral king and reveal your betrayal.”

There was no out of here and they both knew it. Marek sighed as Tera flew off into the air.

Rick and Jason’s teams were present in a lounge just large enough to hold them with only a little crowding.

"The Adventure Society has instructed me — again — to request your cooperation," Rick said to Jason.

"Which is exactly what we're doing," Humphrey responded in Jason's place. "Beyond providing some facilities, however, there is little we have to contribute. We could take normal contracts since the monsters don't stop coming just because we've gone to war with the messengers. But there are diamond-rankers out there, hunting Jason down. As team leader I cannot, in good conscience, advocate that he expose himself to that."

"The society has assured me that it won't happen again."

"The society can't control the diamond-rankers any more than it can me," Jason said. "If they really want something, who can stop them?"

"You, apparently," Phoebe told him. "They are extremely eager to know where you sent those messengers."

"Which is where they are going to squeeze you," Rick added. "They have countless witnesses to what happened in that bunker, Jason. They saw what looked like you portalling a bunch of messengers, including multiple gold-rankers, to safety."

"And how do they explain my ability to portal one gold-ranker, let alone multiples?"

"They don't," Rick said. "And they don't have to. They just have to accuse you of aiding the enemy in battle and they can drag you out by the hair. Your connection to Soramir Rimaros is the only reason they haven't."

"Their inability to go where I've been hiding is the only reason they haven't," Jason corrected. "They already tried dragging me off."

"Is that where you've been hiding the messengers?" Rick asked. "Because it looks from the outside like you're hiding them."

"I'm not hiding them," Jason said. "I'm holding them."

"Why?"

Jason sighed.

"I don't have to tell you that, Rick. I don't answer to you."

"Yes, Jason, you do. I'm representing the Adventure Society and I'm doing my best to not have them strike your membership and haul you in as a traitor."

Jason ran his hands over his face in a weary gesture.

"I knew this was going to be trouble. Alright, Rick, you tell whoever that if they want the messengers, I'll open up that portal you mentioned and let them through. The messengers are there."

"They said they want the location that portal leads to."

“That’s a question with a complicated answer. Suffice to say, there is no other way in, only the portal.”

“They won’t believe you.”

“I’ll try not to cry myself to sleep over it.”

“Jason, you’re a silver-ranker and you need to accept that. Why are you making things harder than they have to be?”

The atmosphere in the room grew heavy. Jason and the building around them became difficult to distinguish from one another, merging into a single, overbearing power.

“Because the easy way involves giving up all my secrets and all my control, Rick. If these people understood who and what I am, they would try to take me and control me, and that is something” **I will not allow to happen.**

The room was frozen in the wake of Jason’s declaration made with more than just words. In the long silence that followed, Rick and his team looked at Jason with discomfort. Jason was not a large man, but in that moment, his presence suffocated the room.

“I’m sorry you were dragged into this, Rick,” Jason said softly. “You’ve been placed in an awkward position. You’re thinking of me as a silver-ranker, and that’s fair because I am one. But that’s not all I am, and they know that. They’re trying to make me think of myself as only a silver-ranker so that I’ll capitulate to their demands, let them take control of my actions and rummage through my secrets. They want to know why gods and great astral beings listen to what I have to say, and the knowledge that led me to the point that they do. Do you think they desire what is mine so they can use it for altruistic purposes?”

“Are your reasons altruistic, Jason?” Rick asked. To his surprise, this drew a wide smile from Jason.

“It’s a good question, isn’t it? There are things I have to do, but is that altruism or just responsibility? I’m hoping there isn’t a difference and that, when all is said and done, I come out the other side as an intact person.” Jason sighed and stood up.

“Here is the bottom line, Rick: if anyone from the Adventure Society or the diamond-rankers want to see the messengers, they can. They just have to go through the same portal.”

“Can’t the messengers come out?”

“Not until I let them.”

“So let them.”

“No. I’m sorry, Rick but I don’t just think of myself as a silver-ranker anymore, whatever the Adventure Society might want. My rank isn’t who or what I am; it’s a deficit I

need to overcome before I can handle all the other things I have going on. Arrogant, I know, but there's only so many times you can save the world before you admit to yourself that you really are special."

Rick stood up as well.

"They won't like hearing what you have to say," he told Jason. "And I don't think they'll be too happy with me as the messenger, but I don't mind that. I don't want my adventuring career to be defined as the guy they get to talk to you when you're being a pain."

Jason grinned and shook Rick's hand.

"You can take them back now, Vidal," Jason told the Adventure Society liaison standing in the corner. Soon Rick and his team were gone, leaving Jason and his team behind.

Jason let out a sigh.

"Rick stood his ground well," Jason said. "Good for him, even if the circumstances are not. Like all of you, he's been dragged into a mess on my account. I'm sorry I've done that to you. Again."

"You don't have to apologise for that," Sophie told him. "I don't know where I'd be if you didn't stick your head places no sane person would, but it's somewhere very bad."

"Hey," Neil said. "If getting in trouble with diamond-rankers from time to time is what it takes to sleep in a cloud bed and wake up to quality breakfast every day, then those diamond-rankers can sod right off."

"We're all with you, Jason," Humphrey said. "No regrets. But we do need to have some sense of where this is going."

"For now, I'm stalling," Jason told him. "I think the woman in charge of the local messengers is going to make a move, and we need to see what it is before we can decide what to do."

Chapter 701

Developing Any Skill Takes Practise

“No,” Amos said, looking at the portal to Jason’s soul realm atop the roof of the cloud palace.

“No?” Jason asked lightly.

“No,” his aura teacher confirmed. “I am not going in there.”

Amos Pensinata was a gold-ranker from Rimaros travelling with Jason, instructing Jason in aura use. Amos had an unusual qualification in this regard, having an experience of extreme spiritual trauma early in his adventuring career that mirrored Jason’s. As a result, they shared a significantly above-average aura strength and sensitivity. Amos was able to instruct Jason on how to leverage that, using aura manipulation techniques developed over his long career.

Amos was not able to instruct Jason in every method of leveraging his aura manipulation, however. Jason’s unusual nature, hewing closer to a messenger than a normal essence user, allowed him to manipulate his aura in ways that normally only messengers could. Most notably, Jason could wield his aura as not just a spiritual but a physical force, outside of even what Amos could accomplish. This left Jason learning what he could in this aspect from observing messengers.

As an aura-use pioneer, Amos was interested in the potential of Jason’s aura. He had already been studying messengers, whose aura manipulation skills outstripped those of adventurers. While many aspects were unavailable to him, he could still use what he learned to refine his own techniques. Jason represented not just a way to advance the study of aura manipulation but to learn about and combat the aura advantage messengers held over adventurers.

Messengers were more advanced in how they employed their auras than the adventurers of Pallimustus. Only exceptions like Amos and Jason were able to overpower their messenger counterparts, and even then it was often with brute force rather than skilful employment of aura suppression. If Jason was to fulfil his potential, he would need to master the aura techniques of the messengers.

When Jason informed Amos he had a line on how to do that, Amos was appropriately interested. It was common knowledge now that Jason was holding messenger prisoners and refusing to turn them over to the Adventure Society. Amos accordingly suspected that Jason had managed to torture some secrets out of them.

Jason had little to do in the weeks since the Battle of Yaresh. Hiding out in his soul realm from the diamond-rankers, he mostly emerged to check on his cloud palace, currently serving as a hospital. Specifically, he was making sure that the Healer priestess running the place didn't serve inedible slop in the cafeteria kitchen.

Most of Jason's time had been split between training and coming to terms with his messenger prisoners. Throughout the weeks since the raid, Jason had been having lengthy daily discussions with the gold-rank leader of the messengers, Marek.

Marek was a window into the messengers and their knowledge that Jason very much needed. He did not have access to the kind of dimensional knowledge Jason needed, but he was an authority on messenger aura combat. This was what led Amos and Jason to the rooftop of Jason's cloud palace. Marek had insights that both adventurers would welcome, and Jason wanted to double-check something else. He wanted to know if Amos would enter his soul realm, and was hoping he would refuse.

"I cannot sense what is on the other side of that portal," Amos said. "But I can sense that it is a danger to me, if whoever controls it wants it to be."

"Yep," Jason said happily and Amos frowned at him. Jason noted that getting to know Amos was essentially a matter of studying frown variants.

"You are satisfied with my refusal?" Amos asked.

"I was pretty sure you'd have a sense of what's through the portal, but I wanted to double-check."

"Why?"

"The diamond-rankers. I offered to let them in, but if they actually take me up on it, there's a solid chance they'd kill me the moment I let them back out."

"It would pose a threat to even them?"

"Yep."

"Then you are likely right. Whatever responsibilities they feel to this city and adventurers as a whole, a silver-ranker that could pose an actual threat to them is something they would be unable to tolerate. I would be wary of allowing even gold-rankers you do not trust implicitly inside. More importantly, they should be ones that trust *you* implicitly."

Jason took heed, not just because he valued his mentor's opinion, but because he spoke for so long on it. Amos Pensinata was a man who wouldn't use two words when one would do, or use one word when he could get away with ignoring you. Given his power and prestige, he could get away with ignoring most people.

Jason was further interested in Amos' warning because of the nature of his soul realm itself. When it was significantly less developed, the portal itself had a restriction that only those that trusted Jason completely were able to enter. Jason had often wondered about that restriction, especially since it had been lifted. He now suspected that it was a defensive mechanism that prevented those with the power to harm him into his soul. That such a restriction was no longer necessary set Jason's mind to gaming-out the ramifications.

Amos looked sternly at Jason as he stood in thought, eyes unfocused as he stared into the middle distance. Before them, the city of Yaresh was still in the process of recovery, only showing scant signs of rebuilding.

"Why would diamond-rankers want to go through your portal?" a female voice asked as an elf walked up the stairs to join them on the roof.

"Politics," Amos grumbled unhappily.

"Hmm?" Jason said, looking up at the newcomer. "Oh, yes. Lord Pensinata is right. Politics. Which I always feel I should be better at than I ever turn out to be, sadly. Still, developing any skill takes practise."

The elf was Hana Shavar, High-Priestess of the Healer and the person in charge of operations using Jason's cloud palace as a base. Those operations had gradually moved the cloud palace from a triage hospital in the wake of the messenger attack to a processing and support centre. It was now mostly oriented around reuniting separated families, arranging temporary housing and making sure everyone had regular access to food and clean water.

At the same time, it was filtering the population for anyone trying to sneak in any unpleasant surprises, like world-taker worms. The parasitic apocalypse beasts were still being dealt with to the south and their appearance in Yaresh in its current state would be a disaster.

"What can I do for you, Priestess Shavar?" Jason asked.

"Before we get to that," the priestess said, "I want to hear about these diamond-rankers. I assume we are talking about the same ones that came tromping through my hospital operations?"

"We are," Jason told her.

"Can I expect further disruptions, then?"

"I'm hoping not," Jason said. "I've played the hard line with the Adventure Society representatives, so now I need to show that I can make a concession. I've offered to let

the diamond-rankers into the place I'm keeping the messengers, but since I don't want to make an actual concession, I'm hoping they will decline when presented with the offer."

"Hoping?"

"I was very confident in my political predictions early in my adventuring career, and other people paid the price of my foolishness. These days I keep my options open, even when some options fall precipitously short of being ideal ones. There are acceptable outcomes even if the diamond-rankers choose to go through this portal."

Hana focused her attention on the portal for a moment.

"I don't think they will go through," she said. "I think it will make them uneasy, and they will take that unease out on you."

"I do hope so," Jason said. "Things will get awkward if they think they are unable to keep me in line."

"They can keep you in line," Amos said with certainty.

"Of course they can," Jason agreed.

"You're looking to be brought to heel," the priestess realised.

"Yep. I've gotten used to making bigger splashes than is warranted by my rank, and I don't always have accommodating authority figures to bail me out. If I can at least make a show of conceding to the diamond-rankers, they are more likely to leave bringing me into line to the Adventure Society."

"Which would come down to lumping you with the least desirable contracts they can muster," Hana said. "But you're playing a dangerous game, Asano. Every adventurer trained by a guild or an adventuring family had heard stories of diamond-rankers making bad decisions when confronted with power they can neither understand nor overcome."

"Your privilege is showing, priestess. I was trained in a place where diamond-rankers are practically mythical."

"Then that is your loss, Mr Asano. The fact that the diamond-rankers forced their way into the cloud palace demonstrates that the stories I mentioned are accurate. The simple fact is that diamond-rankers become accustomed to doing whatever they want. Denying them that goes badly."

"I have to acknowledge the point," Jason said. "And they ransacked the palace when they thought I was refusing to accept their power over me. I hate to think what they'll do when they realise how much power I really have."

"And how much power is that exactly?" Hana asked. "I watched the gold-rank messengers that invaded this building during the raid desperately fight their way back out without accomplishing anything."

Jason nodded at the portal.

“Step though and find out.”

“No thank you. Be careful provoking these diamond-rankers, Asano. They won’t want to be seen bullying a silver-ranker, but an unrepentantly defiant one is a different matter. It won’t hurt their reputation to chastise an idiot who doesn’t know when to back off.”

“Thus, the concession of letting them go see where I’m keeping the messengers,” Jason said. “If they turn it down, that’s on them. It’s not like they’re going to go around explaining to people that it’s okay to beat on a silver-ranker because he has a scary portal. That just makes them look even weaker.”

“Unless they go into that portal and realise how much power you have over them there,” Amos pointed out. “They may just kill you outright, whatever it does to their reputation.”

“Yeah,” Jason acknowledged with a sigh. “I hope that’s not the way it goes, but I’ll deal with it if it is.”

“You’ll deal with dying?” Hana asked.

“It’s kind of my thing,” Jason told her. “Ask your boss.”

“I am the High Priestess. I do not have a boss.”

“You’re a high priestess,” Jason told her. “Your whole job is having a boss.”

“You should not speak so casually of the gods, Asano.”

“So people keep telling me. You’re a busy woman, Priestess; what brought you up here in the first place?”

“I would like you to convert dormitory room four into a second cafeteria and expand the kitchen.”

“Now?”

“Late afternoon, during the shift change and before the dinner service.”

“Okay,” Jason said. “Anything else?”

“A warning if any diamond-rankers will be going on a rampage.”

“I’ll do my best. No promises.”

Hana gave Jason a look up and down, her expression showing dissatisfaction, and then headed back downstairs.

“Now,” Amos said. “Why am I here, if you never expected me to go through the portal?”

“Just a sec,” Jason said as cloud-substance rose up from the roof to swiftly encase them in a dome. The stairwell was also sealed off. Direct sunlight was blocked by the

cloudy barrier and instead filtered diffusely through the dome. Jason's aura flooded the area inside, making it a part of his spirit domain.

Jason's spirit domains were locations where he had extreme control over the spiritual forces within and even an amount of control over the physical reality. Along with his permanent domains on Earth, he could take any or all of his cloud constructs into his domain, although he had been leaving the hospital mostly free of his influence. Amos frowned as his senses were cut off, no longer extending beyond the new roof.

"Can't have anyone peeking," Jason told him apologetically, then gestured casually at the portal. Through it stepped a gold-rank messenger.

Chapter 702

War Guilt Clause

Marek Nior Vargas stood before the portal leading out of Asano's astral kingdom. In the weeks since he first entered, his life and future had been entirely transformed, but he found himself nervous as he looked at the way out. The world outside held immense potential, now. It held a hope that he had never felt before, but with hope came the chance for that hope to be crushed. Given Marek's ambitions, being crushed was the more likely outcome.

"This isn't me letting you run loose," Asano reiterated. "I just want you, me and a man I know to have a talk about auras."

The Jason Asano standing next to Marek was one of countless copies, lesser avatars running around Asano's astral kingdom. He would not have a prime avatar until he was complete as an astral king. Even so, he had no trouble holding a conversation with Marek while his true body was talking with whoever was on the other side of the portal.

"I know," Marek said. "I won't run."

Not only did Asano still have all of Marek's people but there was no telling who or what was waiting through the portal. For all Marek knew, Asano could be handing him over to the Adventure Society or an unscrupulous researcher eager to dissect a powerful messenger.

He didn't believe that to be the case. Marek had been living inside Asano's soul for weeks which had given him an unusually intimate perspective on the man, although that in itself could be deceiving. Time and again Marek had seen people work against their own interests and core beliefs, for reasons that he could scarcely comprehend.

He had spoken at length with Asano, largely about the messengers. Marek had a sense that Asano was looking for reasons not to kill them, and perhaps even let them go. It made little sense to Marek as messengers did not show mercy. He couldn't help but wonder if that was an aspect of his indoctrination that he had yet to dig out and examine. Perhaps his incarceration in Asano's astral kingdom was a chance to do that. It was something to discuss with Payan, who was as close as he had to a brother.

"There's a slight delay," Asano said. "I'm talking with a high priestess. I don't think bringing you out while she's there will be a good move."

"I'm not sure bringing me out while anyone is there is a wise choice."

"Yes, but the man I want you to meet is not foolish enough to come in and meet you here."

“He doesn’t trust you?”

“Not that much. You came in here and opened up your soul, but would you have done that just to save your life?”

“No. I wanted an astral king that was not like the others. If I had known you would free us, I would have rushed in.”

“Tera would not,” Jason said. “Have you made any headway with her?”

“There is nothing you do not see and hear in this place,” Marek pointed out. “You have been privy to our every interaction.”

“I know what you and she have said, yes, but not how you think. Ascribing my sensibilities to messenger mentality will only lead me to false assumptions.”

“She is still fragile. You gave her and I the same thing, but the results are very different. For me, it is a chance at a future for my entire people. From her, you have taken everything. Who she is, what she is. Her identity as a messenger. You’ve poisoned her to other messengers, taking even her right to offer loyalty. She hates you from the depths of her being, and doesn’t like me much better. Everything she despises, I see as a gift greater than I can ever reciprocate.”

“Assuming I give you the chance to go out and do something with that gift.”

“I believe you will, sooner or later. I still don’t understand what you get out of mercy, but I believe you do get something.”

Asano gave Marek a long, assessing look before speaking.

“The greatest martial arts trainer my world ever produced was asked by one of his students why he showed mercy to an enemy. He said that for a person with no forgiveness in their heart, living is a worse punishment than death. I’m paraphrasing; his accent was a bit sketchy.”

“It may take me some time to understand that for myself. And if I do, I could easily see myself rejecting the principle. Mercy is leaving the roots of trouble to grow back stronger.”

“Mercy can seem like foolishness, and perhaps it is. But it’s also the hope for tomorrow. Ruthlessness will never turn an enemy into a friend. It leaves only barren ground, in the world and in your soul. I’ve seen that in a half-dozen years of having power, so you must have seen it over and over.”

“I have,” Marek confirmed. “Barren worlds and barren souls are how messengers operate.”

“Well, if you’re going to stage a revolution anyway, maybe consider revisiting that policy. There’s a term in my world, ‘Carthaginian peace.’ It means to set terms of peace,

following a military victory, that cripple the defeated so they cannot recover and rebuild. To take those who have been put down and keep them down.”

Asano sighed before continuing.

“There was a war in my world. The Great War. A tangled mess of political alliances turned one incident into a globe-spanning conflict. The war to end all wars, they called it.”

“There is never an end to war.”

“No,” Asano agreed. “No, there isn’t. When the Great War was done, there was a peace treaty into which the victors placed what became known as the war guilt clause. It lay all blame at the feet of the vanquished. It stripped them of power, of dignity. Of the ability to rebuild in the face of the greatest conflict my world had ever seen.”

“The seed of a new war?” Marek asked. He had seen many worlds and Asano’s tale was a familiar one.

“Yes. From the ashes of a fallen nation rose a monster. He raised that country from the ashes using pride and hate, fed on the bitterness of a people who had been spat on and ground into the dirt. The next war was worse, worse than anyone ever imagined. There are few cases where war has truly right and wrong sides, but evil was spreading across the world. Even then, those who were supposed to be on the right side used weapons that annihilated entire cities full of civilians. Much as your people tried to do here in Yaresh. Oddly enough, your people cannot match mine for bending the power of creation to unconscionable ends. Our weapons of mass destruction proved more effective than your apocalypse beast.”

“What came of the garuda that stopped the naga genesis egg?”

“If anyone knows, they haven’t told me. He vanished while you and I were underground. But the battle we fought here in Yaresh was nothing compared to the war I’m talking about. Of the nations that were the primary instigators of the war, one was in the east and the other in the west. In the east, it was a nation called Japan. One of the many countries opposing them was Australia. My country, although I would not be born for another half-century.”

Asano smiled and gestured at his face.

“My mother’s people come from Australia and my father’s from Japan. As ugly and brutal as that war became, as much as millions suffered and died, the day came when those nations were not enemies but allies. That change came about in your lifetime; probably only a fragment of it. There is always a future, Marek. You could say I’m the living embodiment of that. You have told me over and over that you want to build a new future for your people. Mercy is the only way to build a future worth bothering with.”

Marek did not respond, instead thinking at length on what Jason had said. He was still thinking when Jason spoke again.

“It’s time. Out you pop, chief.”

Jason warily kept his senses locked on both Amos and Marek as Marek emerged from the portal. They both tensed up on spotting one another, auras sharp as weapons, but neither opened hostilities. They were inside a dome atop the roof of Jason’s cloud palace. Jason’s presence flooded the area, which he had made a part of his spirit domain. His domain had neither the power nor the influence of his soul realm, through the still-active portal, but it still allowed him to command considerable power.

“Be civil,” Jason told them. “This is a conversation, not a war.”

“He and his kind brought war to this city,” Amos pointed out. The intensity of his gaze fell just short of boring through the messenger’s head.

“I was merely doing as commanded.”

“Okay,” Jason said, pointing a finger at Marek’s face. “You and I are going to have some long conversations about the ‘just following orders’ defence, but in the meantime, no more war talk. From either of you.”

Jason’s gaze moved from Marek to Amos.

“Marek, here,” Jason told Amos, “has agreed to give up the goods on how messengers use their auras. In return, I’ve told him that you won’t crush his skull to paste in your bare hands, okay?”

Marek and Jason both looked at Amos’ hands. They remained at his sides but his fingers were flexing as if aching to do exactly what Jason had just described.

“Why would you betray your own kind?” Amos asked Marek.

“I don’t betray my kind,” Marek told him. “I betray the astral kings who betrayed their own kind long before I emerged from the birthing tree.”

“The birthing tree?” Amos asked.

“Messengers are born from trees,” Jason said. “I think that means they’re technically plants, but we shouldn’t get side-tracked. We’re here for Marek to teach us about messenger auras.”

“I ask again,” Amos said, his glare still locked on Marek’s face. “Why would he do that?”

“I have long wished to undermine the astral kings,” Marek said. “Not for your people, but for mine. We are slaves, indoctrinated to think our bondage is glory, our servitude

superiority. In freeing me from that bondage, Jason Asano has done something I did not think possible. Now I am free to act, if Asano ever releases me to do so.”

“That doesn’t answer the question,” Amos growled.

“Doesn’t it?” Jason asked. “You don’t know gratitude when you hear it?”

“From a messenger?”

“I am as surprised as you,” Marek told Amos, who turned back to face the messenger.

“You’re saying that you serve Asano now?”

“No. He could have made me and mine his slave, but instead, he gave me the freedom to serve no one and nothing but my own ideals.”

Marek glanced at Jason, then back to Amos.

“He showed me mercy.”

“I won’t,” Amos said. “If you serve your own messenger ideals, I should put you down before you get the chance to spread them.”

“That’s enough,” Jason said sharply, drawing on the power of his spirit domain. Although a foot shorter than Amos and two shorter than Marek, His presence loomed over them. Both Marek and Amos had supreme aura senses, but they didn’t need them to know exactly who owned the ground on which they stood.

“I know what Marek is offering sounds too good to be true,” Jason told Amos. “All the techniques messengers use for aura combat, freely offered up. Mostly freely. Kind of freely. I mean, yes, he’s my prisoner and I told him that it was a condition of me ever letting him out. One condition of many. So, not freely at all. But still, offered up.”

Jason resisted smiling as Amos and Marek looked at him with the exact same mix of exasperation, wariness and disbelief.

“It’s hard to believe, I know,” Jason told Amos. “I bring out a messenger commander who claims that I’ve done something mysterious and now he wants to go off and fight the astral kings instead of continuing the invasion of his world.”

“I am decades, if not centuries from taking any fight to the astral kings,” Marek said. “What I seek is the chance to plant a seed. A seed that may, in time, grow into a tree of revolution.”

“You realise that plants don’t revolve right?” Jason asked him. “Are you just big on plant metaphors? You know, because you’re a plant.”

“I am not a plant.”

“Bloke, you fell off a tree like an apple. Is dimensional scrumping a major impediment to your reproductive process?”

“Please be serious, Jason Asano.”

Jason laughed.

“Mate, you picked the wrong astral king to hitch your wagon to if you don’t want jokes. No promises on the quality of said jokes, mind you, and they may just be me talking about old episodes of *Monkey Magic*.”

Amos and Marek looked at him with a mix of disapproval and confusion.

“Yeah, I know,” Jason conceded. “it’s just called *Monkey*, not *Monkey Magic*, but it really should have been.”

He started patting the pockets of his tan shorts.

“I have a recording crystal with the theme song, let me find it and you’ll see what I’m talking about—”

“The messenger is right, Asano,” Amos cut him off. “This is not the time for your childishness.”

The amusement fell off Jason’s face instantly, as if he’d been waiting for the interruption. He tapped into his spiritual domain again, using the space around them to lightly pressure Amos’ aura.

“Lord Pensinata,” Jason said. “You need to learn from my team and pay attention to what I do, not what I say. Does it feel like I’m not taking this seriously? We both know how strong your aura is. Try throwing it around and see how far it gets you.”

Amos turned a glare on Jason which would have had most Rimaros adventurers trembling. Jason stared up at the taller man uncowed.

“I’m not your nephew or some mewling guild member, Lord Pensinata; don’t bother with the death stare. I’ve had a lot worse than you give me the evil eye.”

“You should not treat these situations with flippancy,” Amos told him.

“I’ve tried being grim and grave when things get heavy. It doesn’t work out. I don’t know if it’s an overdeveloped sense of melodrama, but I don’t like who it turns me into. Marek and I were just talking about mercy, and when I start spiralling down, I don’t have any. If the price of me not killing a bunch of people is you putting up with the occasional *A-Team* reference — series, not film — then I suggest you suck it up. You can just ignore that while we otherwise talk things through like sensible adults. If that’s too much for you to handle, Lord Pensinata, I suggest you run off and tell on me to the Adventure Society.”

Amos pushed back hard against Jason’s aura. Jason was startled at its full strength, yet it was not enough in Jason’s spirit domain where the very magic around them answered to him. Jason held Amos to a stalemate as Marek shielded himself without interfering. The floor beneath them and the dome over them started trembling with power

and Amos' eyes went wide. He slowly withdrew his aura and Jason matched him in backing off.

"How many secrets do you have, Asano?" Amos asked/

"Enough that I'm starting to regret sharing some of them with you, Lord Pensinata. Marek, go back inside. We won't be having any aura discussions today."

When the messenger was gone, the portal closed. The archway remained but the screen of light within disappeared.

"For a being that claims to be free, he does what you tell him readily enough," Amos said.

"We're done for the day, Lord Pensinata. I think we both need to think about how we each want to move forward from here."

"You engineered this confrontation," Amos accused. "You knew what my reaction would be to you bringing out a gold-rank messenger who is personally responsible for untold death and destruction, and you did so in a place where you have the power."

"Yes," Jason admitted. "That's exactly what I did."

"Are you looking to put me in my place somehow? That will end very badly for you."

"I'm aware, but I'm not trying to put you in your place, Lord Pensinata. I'm trying to make you understand that you're wrong about *my* place. You and the diamond-rankers and the Adventure Society all think you know what my place is. I've barely advanced my essence abilities in the last couple of years and that's all you see. But make no mistake, Lord Pensinata, my power has grown to a level you can't understand until you step through that portal. The one you refuse to, because of the danger."

"My place is not what you think, Lord Pensinata, and I'm tired of playing upstart. I will bend when bending is the best choice, because yes: I am, for now, a silver-ranker. But I'm not just a silver-ranker. The messengers understand that; Soramir Rimaros understands that. The gods understand that. The day is coming, Lord Pensinata, when you will need to grow a Tom Selleck moustache or get out of my way."

Amos frowned, not in anger but in thoughtfulness. He stared at Jason for a long time in silence, while Jason waited. Jason knew the man well enough to keep his mouth shut for once. Finally, Amos spoke.

"If you were anyone else, I would say you are a child shouting into the void. But you told the Builder to leave and he did."

"It was more like making a deal than—"

"Learn when to stop talking, Asano; I have no doubt your mouth gets you in twice as much trouble as it gets you out of. But I am forced to acknowledge that your claims of

power outside your essence abilities are not without merit. If you say that you can stand up to diamond-rankers and suborn messengers then I will accept it. Until such time as you prove you cannot.”

Chapter 703

Primary Purpose

Jason and Gary were standing outside the forge Jason had conjured up in his soul space for Gary to practise his craft. In this space, Jason could conjure up countless materials, including exceedingly rare ones, for Gary to consume. Gary had even secured samples of the materials he wanted to work with so that Jason could accurately reproduce their nature and properties.

It was a level of resource even massive crafting guilds could not offer. Attempts had been made to create specialised mirage chambers for simulated crafting, but the results had never been worth the expenditure.

Gary's forge was a modest building of light-coloured stone. He and Jason leaned against the outside wall, holding fruit drinks that Jason had conjured up. From a magical perspective, they were identical to spirit coins, simply in the shape of delicious tropical beverages in coconut shells with colourful straws and tiny umbrellas. Gary's was significantly larger than Jason's.

"I know you're not happy I have them here," Jason said as they watched a trio of messengers flying through the air in the distance. "Most of the team has been giving me the stink-eye over it. I've fortunately not had to run into Carlos while I'm hiding out in here. For a healer, that guy carries an astounding amount of hate for messengers."

"I'm not a vindictive person," Gary said, "but I can see his point. I saw what they came to this city to do. I saw them doing it; there was only so much I could stop. I don't see how they deserve to live. What do we get from keeping them alive beyond more cruelty and death?"

"I'm trying to figure that out. Can you tolerate it if I forgive them?"

"They don't deserve forgiveness."

"Probably not. But what if I do it anyway?"

Gary sighed, then took a long, loud slurp of his drink. Jason didn't push for an answer, waiting until the lion man was ready to talk.

"When two sides hate each other," Gary said, "There's never going to be peace until someone lets go of that hate. There will always be reasons to hold onto it — good reasons — but then nothing changes. But it can't be one-sided, or it won't work. It can start with one side, but the other still has to meet them halfway. Are these winged bastards going to meet you halfway, Jason?"

"These ones just might. Maybe. And if we're really, really lucky, they may get more of their kind to do the same."

"In time to get them to leave my world?"

"Definitely not. It's more of a planting seeds situation. Ugh, now I'm making plant metaphors. Did you know the messengers are plants?"

"They don't look like plants."

"I know, right? But they grow on trees. They're basically evil fruit. Like broccoli."

"Broccoli is not a fruit," Gary pointed out.

"Exactly," Jason said. "Imagine delicious chunks of pineapple, dusted with cinnamon and salt, and then roasted until they're caramelised and tender before having a little bit of lime squeezed over them. Now imagine what you get instead is broccoli. That's what messengers are."

"Please tell me that pineapple thing is what you're making for lunch."

"No, I'm cooking broccoli."

"What?"

"See? They're the worst."

Jason rubbed his temples as Shade set a cup of tea on the wrought metal picnic table he was sitting at. They were in a small clearing in a garden that had a natural and wild feel to it, inside Jason's soul realm. To get some peace and quiet, no one else in the soul realm could detect it, to the point that the realm would change to lead off anyone that approached. Only Jason and his familiars had access, although Colin was still in a cocoon and Gordon was elsewhere in the realm.

"Thank you," Jason said. It had been a long day of mostly minor frustrations, from adjusting the cloud palace to dealing with politics. Now that he had decided to start resolving his issues with the Adventure Society and the diamond-rankers, Vidal Ladiv was shuttling between the cloud palace and the society campus with messages.

There had been bright moments, however. Acquiring magical materials for personal use was still almost impossible in Yaresh, with everything being commandeered for the reconstruction. It had taken weeks for Clive to collect the materials to resummon Onslow, but Jason left the reunited pair happily sharing a salad.

Another positive was the Adventure Society branch director throwing his support behind Jason in the face of the diamond-rankers. Jason suspected it was some local power play, but he wouldn't turn down the assistance. Vidal Ladiv insisted that the

director's motive was genuine gratitude for Jason's role in getting the Builder to depart early. Jason found his inability to believe in simple gratitude a little saddening.

Jason's plan for the diamond-rankers worked best if their back and forth came out in rumours rather than a public display where things could go wrong. His 'concession' to the diamond-rankers proved enough to save face and keep them off his back, at least for the moment. If he failed to generate any actionable intelligence from the messengers, their patience would not last. The branch director would make sure the right rumours started spreading, along with acting as a buffer between Jason and the diamond-rankers.

The Yaresh diamond-rankers were not the only ones Jason had to deal with. He had sensed the periodic attempts to interfere with his cloud palace and discovered a third diamond-ranker using some manner of device. Jason quickly realised she was the person who had created his cloud flask in the first place, having arrived in the city and now living with Emir.

"I find myself in a strange state of mind," Jason said to his familiar. "I don't have trouble filling my days, yet it also feels like I'm just waiting around. Waiting for diamond-rankers and/or the Voice of the Will to make a move. Waiting for a genius idea on how to deal with the messengers I've got stashed away. Waiting for Colin to emerge as a pretty, pretty butterfly."

"Even so, Mr Asano, you have had at least some time to stop and contemplate some of the issues surrounding you."

"Yeah. The gap between my spiritual development and my essence abilities is becoming an increasing problem. I almost want to go back to Earth and drain vampires until I'm gold-rank."

"Perhaps you should. I imagine the vampires have gone to war by now. If you prioritise claiming messenger dimension magic, you will likely be able to ride the link back to your homeworld."

"You think this Jes Fin Kaal will hand over what I need?"

"I suspect that it is less important to her than to you, Mr Asano. Exactly the kind of bait to get you to participate in whatever scheme she has planned."

"Yeah, well, we'll need to stop whatever that plan is before we even think about Earth."

"There is one thing we should discuss, Mr Asano. We spoke on it briefly when things were more chaotic, and now we have time to talk it through properly."

"Oh?" Jason asked, taking some leftover roasted pineapple from his inventory. He set the plate in front of him, next to his cup of tea.

"Do you recall our talk about your former ability, the quest system?"

"I do," Jason said. "We were talking about how my own ability managed to know things that I didn't."

"I have a suspicion as to the magical sense at the heart of that ability, and what may have happened to that sense when the ability evolved."

Jason leaned back in his chair.

"Do tell."

"There is a rare phenomenon I have not witnessed myself, at least that I am aware of, until you. It would be easy to miss as it is something that does not show itself overtly. Most never heard of it, and many that have don't believe that it's real."

"What is it?"

"It has many names. Eyes of the crucible. Destiny magic. Fate senses. Way of the crossroads. Whatever it is called, the effect is the same. It allows any who possess it to unconsciously sense events of importance. Then, they make a choice without realising it, whether to seek those events out or avoid them. Think of it like hearing a gunshot, and your instincts telling you to run toward or away from the sound. It is rarely so overt, however, with the person often not realising they are even making a choice."

"Okay," Jason said, brow creasing as his mind went over what Shade had just told him. "I have about a million questions. I'm going to start with the idea that I've been running around, guided by my unconscious mind this whole time. If that's true, have I made any real choices, or has this thing been leading me by the nose from the beginning?"

"It has not, Mr Asano. It is not a controlling force but a sense of where important events could potentially take place. For you, it was a quest system. It could have led you safely out of that maze in which you found yourself upon arriving in this world. Instead, it sent you directly to a Builder cultist and his cannibal family. It also sent you to Mr Remove, Mr Xandier and Miss Farrah. It set you on a path that led you here."

"But it could have gone the other way. Kept me out of all the trouble I keep landing in, over and over."

"Yes. You didn't realise it in your conscious mind, but you were choosing, over and over, whether to place yourself in safety or a crucible. And I think we know which way you chose, every time."

"Why? Jason asked. "What is this destiny sense for? How does it even work, mechanically? I mean, do potentially important events let off fate waves or something? And how did I end up with this power or sense or whatever it is?"

"I do not know how it works," Shade said. "It is rare enough that I do not know of it ever being studied."

"So, don't tell Clive is what you're saying."

"That may be best," Shade agreed. "I could only guess at the mechanism, but I would imagine that it measures probabilities in some manner. As for how you came to possess it, I may be able to answer that. So far as I am aware, the conditions for developing fate senses are both specific and unusual. First, it requires a soul at a near-inert stage."

"Near inert?"

"Normal or iron-rank. Perhaps bronze. Surely, by your level of development, you have realised that your soul is not growing stronger. If that were the case, you would never have possessed the power to fend off the Builder."

"Yeah, I get it," Jason said. "Ranking up just lets me tap into more of the soul's potential."

"Precisely."

"Is that why I wasn't harmed as badly as before when I overcharged my aura with Gordon's ritual? I've been awakening my soul so much outside of my essence abilities that I can take the strain now? My soul and my body are the same thing, after all."

"I have no knowledge of the likelihood of that being the case. It is as valid a hypothesis as any I could formulate with the information I have. But to return to the topic at hand, the first requirement of fate senses is a near-inert soul. That soul needs to be in an unusually malleable state."

"Such as when it's been yanked through the astral by a magical phenomenon, destroying the body it was attached to, and it's reworking itself from a human into an outworlder."

"Just so, Mr Asano. And the third requirement is that it needs to have an extremely close encounter with a maximally powerful force. A god or a great astral being. Certain astral phenomena that you are not allowed to know about would also qualify."

"A great astral being like the World-Phoenix. If it was to, say, pay close enough attention to the soul that it gave them something to take with it. A portion of the World-Phoenix's power in the form of a token."

"Yes. The soul, being in a state of flux and coming into contact with that level of power, may develop fate senses as a reflexive defence mechanism. In your case, it manifested in the quest system."

"And it's programmed to prompt either fight or flight," Jason realised. "Depending on whether your instincts are to run from that power or to match it."

"Yes," Shade said.

"And that's why I always treat authority figures like they don't matter. It's my fate senses."

"No, Mr Asano. Fate senses are just that: senses. You are responsible for your own behaviour. You cannot blame fate senses for your actions. Even when they seem to guide you in a certain direction, it is you who unconsciously chooses the direction. The senses themselves only present you with the option. Fight or flight, as you put it."

"Alright," Jason said, sipping at his tea as he processed all the new information. "So, it isn't some inherent destiny pushing me around. It's just me choosing to be in all the situations I've complained about being in for the last half-decade."

"To a degree. I believe that these senses still guide you, but remember that the ability through which they manifested, the quest system, evolved. It stopped pushing you."

"Why would it stop?" Jason asked.

"Think of when it evolved, Mr Asano. When you were iron-rank and you chose to fight a silver-rank monster you could not possibly defeat yet could have easily fled. Instead, you chose to fight. You never got another quest after that.

"The waterfall village," Jason said. "When I had to stall out the elemental tyrant while the villagers evacuated."

"You didn't have to, Mr Asano, and that is the point; you chose to. And you received what is, to this day, your largest soul scar in the process. Then, shortly thereafter, you encountered another maximally powerful being. This time you defied it, and your power evolved. Your soul was once again in flux, but you no longer needed the defensive mechanism of the fate senses. What you needed was power on a level of the Builder. Which, of course you couldn't muster at iron-rank."

"Then what did the fate sense turn into? The ability that replaced the quest system rewards chasing danger, but doesn't guide me to it."

"I believe it is largely dormant. It may be guiding you in more subtle ways, but I think it was waiting. You had Gordon, at that stage, and I suspect your fate senses evolved into a different kind of perception; the ability to sense Gordon's potential for the magic he can tap into. You couldn't use it immediately because Gordon still couldn't use it. His vessel was too low-ranked. But then, he bound himself permanently to you, and did so after his vessel was two ranks higher. He still was not high enough rank to use that magic normally, but you could sense it, allowing him to tap into his own potential through you."

"And what is this magic?"

“I did not recognise it, at first. He has only used it at the absolute lowest level and it shouldn't be possible for him to use it at all yet, to the point that the possibility didn't occur to me.”

“Why is this what my fate sense turned into?”

“I suspect that it is a natural evolution of the fate senses to move from guiding behaviour to granting access to higher-order power when the opportunity presents. You proved that not only were you resolved to confront a force on the level of the Builder, but you had potential access to at least one power that operates on the same scale he does: intrinsic-mandate magic.”

“That's what it's called, Gordon's magic?”

“Yes.”

“And it operates on the same scale as a great astral being?”

“It is a form of magic that often involves the expenditure of authority. It lacks the versatility of the magic you are familiar with, and is meant for shaping physical reality, not being used within it. This is the magic the Builder uses to forge worlds. That the World-Phoenix used to remake the dimensional barrier of Earth to cut it off from magic. If you think of all intrinsic-mandate magic as different kinds of guns, the power Gordon has used thus far—”

“Is a water pistol?”

“No, Mr Asano. It is a piece of paper with the word 'bang' written on it. This magic is typically employed by transcendent entities and sometimes their diamond-rank agents. Miss Dawn used it when she annihilated the Builder city fortress.”

“She used authority for that?”

“No, Mr Asano. She used her star seed to tap into the most meagre trickle of the World-Phoenix's power. If she had used actual authority, the results would not have been so modest.”

“Modest? She glassed an area the size of a state.”

“Which is why the great astral beings would not allow you to possess loose authority, Mr Asano.”

“Yeah, well... fair enough. Can astral kings use this magic?”

“Yes, as can their diamond-ranked Voices of the Will, if they allow it. If you can complete your transformation into an astral king, you may have an easier time tapping into Gordon's magic potential, even before you surpass diamond rank.”

“Why does Gordon even have that potential?”

"I do not know. Perhaps it is the connection of his kind to the Sundered Throne or the All-Devouring Eye. But those are topics that I will not expound upon. Not until you are stronger."

"You think I can't handle it?"

"I think the wider cosmos has etiquette, and that etiquette exists for a reason. I will not violate it to introduce you to things you have no power to influence. Unless you order me to do so."

"No," Jason said. "If you say that's for when I'm a big boy, I trust you. I know that if ignorance will blindside me, you'll warn me ahead of time."

"Thank you, Mr Asano."

Once again Jason paused, eating pineapple and drinking tea as he pondered the ramifications of what Shade had told him.

"The World-Phoenix," he said. "She had to know what she was doing to me."

"Yes, Mr Asano. In fact, I imagine that instilling you with fate senses was a primary purpose, not a side effect. She wanted you drawn into events. And if her contact with you left you a gibbering wreck, she could always explore other avenues. Dawn made it clear enough that you were simply one path the World-Phoenix was exploring."

"Hold on," Jason said. "What's this gibbering wreck business?"

"The conditions that generate fate senses are quite extreme, Mr Asano. I mentioned how souls develop those senses as a defence mechanism. This is the same process that alters a soul in the wake of spirit trauma. And like spirit trauma, not everyone comes back stronger. Some are ruined, their own souls poisoning their minds, rendering them insensible."

"Oh, that's great. Remind me to tell the World-Phoenix to bog off."

"No, Mr Asano."

Chapter 704

Everyone Has a Price

“Whatever you may be thinking, Mr Asano, the diamond-rankers aren’t spending their days plotting ways to snatch away your secrets.”

Vidal Ladiv was not enjoying his job. He had always imagined people with real power to be sober and serious, dedicated to carrying out the duties that came with the power and influence they possessed. Sadly, they turned out to have the same pride, biases and vested interests as everyone else.

“I definitely wasn’t thinking that,” Jason said unconvincingly.

“The diamond-rankers have largely concerned themselves with monitoring messenger activity in the wake of the attack on Yaresh,” Vidal continued. Part of his job as liaison between the Adventure Society and Jason was giving Jason regular reports on the broad activities of the Adventure Society. It wasn’t what Vidal had been directed to do, but Jason would freeze him out if he didn’t. If that happened, the Adventure Society would deem Vidal’s assignment a failure.

Falling short on one assignment would not torpedo Vidal’s career, but such an important job came with extra attention. If the Adventure Society was happy with his work, it would mean not just more important jobs but some flexibility in choosing them. Vidal was very much looking forward to a diplomatic or administrative job, far away from anyone as volatile as Jason Asano.

“The best assessments we have suggest that the messengers lost more people in the attack than intended,” Vidal continued his report. “Once their numbers were sent into a frenzy, they were less effective at using their summoned monsters as a shield. Then, once our diamond-rankers were freed up, they inflicted a lot of messenger casualties, especially during the withdrawal. As a result, the messengers have abandoned one of their five fortresses to consolidate in the others.”

“They don’t have a diamond-ranker anymore,” Jason said.

“No,” Vidal said. “But we also don’t have the forces to stage counterattacks. Many adventurers are still working to purge the world-taker worms in the towns and villages to the south. There was talk of our diamond-rankers attacking the messenger fortresses alone, but the defence infrastructure of those fortresses is formidable. While our diamond-rankers are tangled up in the defences of one fortress, the others could mount punitive attacks.”

“For all the messengers took a hit,” Jason said, “we took a worse one. Diamond-ranker aside.”

“That is the current assessment,” Vidal said.

He looked around the rooftop garden in which they sat, atop Asano’s cloud palace. Days earlier it had been a domed area that sent the diamond-ranker, Charist, into a fresh rage. His inability to penetrate some areas of Jason’s building with his magical senses was what had prompted him to invade the palace in the first place. The other diamond-ranker, Allayeth, mostly kept him in check, but Charist’s patience had run dry. He was not to be stopped when he had burst into Jason’s cloud palace and, even as she disagreed with the move, Allayeth had gone along to present a unified front.

While the two Yaresh diamond-rankers worked together, they were very different. Charist embraced the power and authority that came with his rank, using it to bull through any situation, be it combative, diplomatic or social. Allayeth was more subtle, working within societal strictures instead of lording over them as her power would allow. If not for the need to be a moderating force on Charist, people may not have even known her name.

The reason Vidal had so much insight into the pair was due to an unlikely friendship formed between himself and Allayeth. He knew that she had only approached him to be a lever on Asano, doubtless one of many she was cultivating. Even so, Vidal genuinely enjoyed her company. She had a knack for turning the normally imposing presence of a diamond-ranker into something compelling instead. He didn’t know if she cared at all about him, but she had certainly given him access to information he otherwise would never have encountered.

Part of that information was Allayeth’s thoughts and plans around certain topics. One example was that Allayeth had expressed respect for Asano’s approach of making the appearance of concession, even as it frustrated her. Having looked into Asano’s background and connections, she now realised that pushing him as much as Charist advocated could have greater repercussions than they had originally realised.

“I think you should sit down with one of the diamond-rankers,” Vidal suggested to Jason after his report was done.

“One of them?” Jason asked pointedly. “That implies that most of the friction is coming from the more confrontational of the pair.”

“With respect, Mr Asano, most of the friction is coming from you. You disrespect their rank. You take an entire force of messengers prisoner and refuse to reveal where they are being held. You hide away for weeks from attempts by the Adventure Society to debrief you.”

Vidal couldn't sense Jason's aura. He knew that, even if he could, he would not have been able to read his emotions through it. It was unnecessary, as it turned out, as Jason's expression darkened.

"I have larger concerns than one battle in one city, Mr Ladviv."

He was using Vidal's surname, which was not a good sign.

"Larger concerns than a city all but razed to the ground?" Vidal asked.

"Yes. You know the kinds of forces I deal with. It's the whole reason the Adventure Society attached you to me, but I find myself increasingly regretting my acceptance of that. The reason we came to this city was to fight messengers, and I don't like the fact that my integrity seems to be in constant question."

"You are keeping a lot of secrets, Mr Asano."

"As is every other adventurer. But mine are a sin because powerful people want to know them? Go back to your diamond-rankers, Mr Ladviv, and tell them to come here and answer my questions. Does my wanting their secrets make them traitors because they refuse to reveal them?"

"Of course not. That doesn't make any sense."

"No, Mr Ladviv. It does not."

Jason's smile didn't reach his eyes, but it reached Vidal's spine and sent a chill down it. Vidal had some experience — certainly more than he wanted — of dealing with diamond-rankers of late. They always restrained their formidable presence around him, and he got an unnervingly similar feeling from Jason. The experience, however, had made him very good at holding his nerve.

"There is one other thing, Mr Asano."

"Go on."

"I have been asked to request that you stop projecting your senses across the entire city. It's not strictly prohibited, but it is considered extremely rude and several gold-rankers have made complaints."

"Not to me."

That request had taken Vidal by surprise. A fellow silver-ranker being able to hide his aura completely was one thing, but doing so while projecting his senses across a massive area was another. That was something he hadn't realised was possible.

"Any gold-rankers wishing to complain," Jason continued, "are welcome to come here and do so in person."

They both knew that there was little chance of that happening. Gold-rankers had the survival instincts to not get caught up in diamond-rank conflicts, even if that conflict was

with a silver-ranker. Perhaps especially with a silver-ranker, if the silver-ranker in question was anything but immediately crushed.

"I will convey your response to the Adventure Society," Vidal said and stood up.

"That's it?" Jason asked him. His voice sounded casual but had a dangerous undertone Vidal was certain did not slip in by mistake.

"What else would there be, Mr Asano?"

"The messengers made contact with the city authorities yesterday. Were you not going to share that information?"

"Mr Asano, I—"

"If you're thinking about lying to me, Mr Ladiv, I would suggest you revise that idea."

"Did I do something to anger you, Mr Asano?"

Jason frowned and shook his head.

"No, Mr Ladiv. You just have the unfortunate role of being the messenger. I'm getting very tired of authority groups telling me what to do while trying to take what I have. It was something I put up with a lot in my old world, and it's bringing up bad memories. I need to get to a higher rank, and I need to stop involving myself in major events until I do."

"I think it may be more than a little late for that, Mr Asano."

"Yes, but I can at least try. It may be time to relinquish my membership in the Adventure Society. Now, Mr Ladiv. What can you tell me about what the messengers have to discuss with the city authorities?"

"Very little, Mr Asano. Genuinely. The messengers sent one of their suborned locals rather than come in person, probably because they knew a messenger wouldn't be allowed to leave again. They've made contact with the government, not the Adventure Society. The messenger approached the ducal manor, where I do not have any information sources."

Jason raised his eyebrows, his expression offering Vidal a chance to correct himself.

"No high-level information sources," Vidal said. "I've made inroads with some of the low-level bureaucrats, but the duke's office is being careful with this information. I was lucky to find out the messengers had made contact at all. I'm surprised you even heard about it."

"You just asked me to stop spreading my senses across the city, Mr Ladiv."

"Yes, but it's not like a messenger came flapping their way into the city. It was an elf taking care to be discreet. Unless you got extremely lucky, you would need to pay diligent and near-constant attention to numerous places around the city simultaneously to catch information like that."

“Or be very lucky.”

“Are you a lucky man, Mr Asano?”

“I would say yes, on the whole. I’ve also developed a knack for splitting my attention without diminishing focus.”

“Superior multi-tasking is something every essence user shares, Mr Asano. It is a function of the spirit attribute. Monitoring this entire city, however, would require something far more developed.”

“Yes,” Jason agreed. “What I’m talking about is more akin to how a…”

Jason smiled, Vidal unable to tell if it was in self-amusement or self-recrimination.

“Some things are best left unsaid,” Jason told him. “We are done here, Mr Ladv. Find out more about what the messengers want.”

“Mr Asano, I agreed to give you a broad overview of Adventure Society news, not to become your investigator. I’m just a liaison and you’re looking to take liberties. I don’t work for you.”

“Then perhaps it is time that our arrangement comes to an end.”

Jason stood up and plucked a folder from his dimensional space, holding it out for Vidal.

“All the identity documents for John Miller,” Jason said. “If I’m going to revoke my Adventure Society membership, I can hardly run around with the false identity they provided for me. I never did a great job of maintaining it, anyway.”

“You’re seriously considering separating from the Adventure Society?”

“The point of being an adventurer is that the Adventure Society facilitates me helping people. If all they are going to do is make demands and get in my way, then what is the point?”

“And the rest of your team?”

“That is up to them.”

Jason ran a hand over his face as his senses tracked the departure of a troubled Vidal Ladv.

“I’m cranky today,” Jason observed. “I didn’t mean to be that confrontational. I don’t like it when the Adventure Society starts reminding me of the Network, though.”

“You don’t truly intend to void your Adventure Society membership, do you?” Shade asked from Jason’s shadow.

“No, that would escalate tensions. But I want to see how they react. It’s an option, albeit one I’m unlikely to take up.”

“Do you think they will take more care to avoid or block your senses?”

“I hope so. Given that your spying is by far the better source of information, I’d rather have them focus on impeding me than watching the shadows.”

“I can only learn so much,” Shade said. “Only the weaker gold-rankers fail to notice my presence, and even then, only when they are inattentive. Like you, Mr Asano, I need to grow stronger to handle the events in which we always seem to find ourselves.”

“But we don’t just find ourselves in them, do we? This fate sense. It means I’m seeking them out. I need to take myself off the board. The idea of returning to Earth and hunting vampires until I’m gold-rank was a frivolous idea, yet it increasingly appeals.”

“You have things to do here.”

“Yes,” Jason said, then let out a small sigh. “Now that I’ve prodded, it will be interesting to see if the Ducal government and the Adventure Society seek to include or exclude me from what the messengers are after.”

“What are you expecting?”

“The Voice of the Will has a problem. She wants something from the underground array, and she needs essence users to get it. But even if she’s in command, the rank and file won’t accept the help of what they see as their lessers. The indoctrination that controls the messenger masses cuts both ways. Marek seems sure the voice will use me as an excuse to make the messengers accept some kind of alliance. I may be an enemy to them, but after what happened in the Battle of Yaresh, they may accept me as an equal.”

“An equal that needs to be eradicated.”

“That’s probably part of how the voice is selling it.”

“Will the city be willing to go along with anything the messengers want after the attack?”

“Everyone has a price, Shade.”

“And what is yours, Mr Asano?”

“Really well-pickled capsicum, tender and sweet. I think I’m going to go make a sandwich.”

Chapter 705

Trust

Jason didn't notice the diamond-ranker until she set foot in his cloud palace and blended in with a stream of civilians making their way to the cafeteria. Even then, he almost missed her as that was not a part of the cloud palace currently within his spirit domain. Rather than react, he observed how she was using her aura to completely blend in.

Jason's own aura control was beyond masterful for his rank, but the diamond ranker demonstrated just how far he had to go. The chance to watch one in action was not to be missed. He observed as she filed in with the others, waited in line and then sat down to eat her food. It wasn't until she was almost done that Jason approached himself.

Jason had his own self-developed technique for blending into crowds. He had first developed it by studying the aura of his vampire friend, Craig Vermillion. From there he had refined it over time, learning to let his aura bleed into that of the world around him until they were all but indistinguishable from one another. The base concept was one he took from the first diamond-ranker he had ever encountered, the Mirror King.

The Mirror King's aura had not been overbearing, instead seeming to merge with the world around it. It had been a revelation for Jason, whose aura and aura senses at the time were still at the most basic levels. For that reason, it was hard to tell how the diamond-ranker in his cafeteria, Allayeth, compared to the Mirror King.

Jason was curious as to how long it would take Allayeth to notice him approaching, but his best guess was that she sensed him the moment he emerged from the part of the palace covered by his spirit domain. For all of his impressive aura strength and refined technique, she was still a diamond-ranker. Each rank represented an exponential leap in power, and for all the power that gold-rankers possessed, diamond-rankers were on another level entirely. Comparing one to Jason's silver-rank was all but pointless.

"That's an impressive technique," Allayeth said as he sat opposite her.

The cafeteria was a series of long tables with benches in front of them that Jason definitely hadn't modelled after the great hall from Hogwarts. People were sitting close to both Allayeth and Jason on either side, but a nuanced aura trick from Allayeth prevented them from paying attention to her words.

"Impressive for my rank, perhaps," Jason said, mimicking Allayeth's trick. It was surprisingly easy, being very much like his own technique for crowd blending.

“You’re frustrated that your rank isn’t higher,” Allayeth said. “That puts you in the same position as every adventurer ever. Even I get frustrated when comparing myself to the likes of Soramir Rimaros. And even he falls short compared to Dawn.”

“You know Dawn?”

“She travelled to many places to warn them of the Builder invasion. I was surprised to hear that you and her were so... close.”

“You know how it is. When work takes up all your time, everyone you know ends up being from work.”

“You worked together?”

“There’s no Adventure Society in my home world, and the local equivalents aren’t up to facing cosmic threats.”

“And you are?”

Jason burst out laughing.

“No,” he said, through his continuing laughter. “No, I am not.”

“I find that hard to believe. I’ve sensed the power on the other side of that portal. I don’t know what it is exactly, but I know I’m certainly not accepting your offer to go through.”

“That’s your choice. The offer is still there.”

“I can’t imagine you fail to understand our concerns, Jason. Can I call you Jason? I heard that you used to prefer more casual forms of address before you returned to our world.”

Jason leaned back a little on the bench, looking at Allayeth thoughtfully. The elf’s immaculate diamond-rank beauty would have arrested attention if she was not using her aura to shunt that attention away. Her eyes were a soft green and her skin was the light brown of a fawn’s fur, and she had wavy, wood-brown hair. Overall, she looked like a dryad of myth; the kind of beautiful, ethereal creature that led men to their demise in folklore.

“You’re a little too well-informed for the kind of actions you’ve been taking thus far,” Jason observed. “Is Charist really so much to handle that you’ve made so many missteps?”

Allayeth’s sounded like a merrily trickling stream.

“He is,” she said. “You have no idea how hard it is to deal with an obstreperous diamond-ranker.”

Jason looked at her from under raised eyebrows and she laughed again.

"I suppose you do, at that," she acknowledged. "Charist is like a dog or a child. You have to let them run around or they start taking it out on the furniture."

"So you let him take it out on my furniture instead?"

"Yes. If I couldn't stop him anyway, I could at least see how you reacted."

"I can respect that. I don't like it, but I can respect it. Is he all tuckered out, now?"

"He's come to recognise that forcing you to capitulate isn't going to happen and stepped back to leave it to me. He has an enviable ability to let go of things that he can't change, especially given his enthusiasm about checking."

"The ability to let go is something I'm trying to cultivate myself."

"How is that working out?"

"Mixed results. Why are you here, Allayeth?"

"I was hoping that you and I could get a fresh start. Perhaps both let go of things."

"I'm open to that. But can you really accept not knowing the secrets you've been trying to dig out?"

"No," she admitted. "If we're going to move forward, at least some of our concerns will need to be put to rest. I'm hoping that you will be open to at least talking it through and seeing if we can find a place where everyone is comfortable."

Jason let out a slow breath, an unhappy expression on his face.

"And here we are," he said sadly. "I've been here, right here, more times than I'd like. Someone wants something from me. Someone powerful, or maybe a powerful organisation. They come at me hard, at first. Pressure is the nice version. Telling me how impossible they are to go against, maybe some thinly veiled threats about the people I care about. Other times, it's not so nice. I've been kidnapped. People have tried to kill me. One guy killed my lover, brother and friend all at once. That guy got to die way too easy."

Jason stopped and looked at the people around them and stood up.

"Walk with me, Allayeth. Is that your given name or your family name?"

"Family. But I'm the only one left to carry it. I also know what it's like for people to go after you through the people you love."

They made their way through the crowded cafeteria, people instinctively moving out of their path. Jason led them to a door that no one else seemed to notice and through it into a narrow but empty hallway.

"After they come at me hard," Jason continued, "and they realise that isn't going to work, that's when they start talking about compromise. When they can't just take what they want, then it's suddenly time to talk it through and see if we can find a place where everyone is comfortable."

Jason gave Allayeth a side glance as they reached an elevating platform.

“Do you think I’ve ever been comfortable in those situations?” Jason asked her as they stepped onto the platform.

“No.”

“No,” Jason agreed. “It’s always the other people who deserve to be comfortable, for some reason. But I worked with them anyway, because some things need to be done, even if you have to hold your nose to do them. But I don’t have to do anything here. This world isn’t on the line — not in any way that I can do something about. So, I don’t see any reason why I should compromise with people just because they failed to strongarm me.”

“Sometimes you have to bend to political realities, Jason.”

“I’m not so sure I do. You pushed, and I didn’t budge. Now you’re telling me to move because you don’t want to push harder while threatening that you will if you have to.”

“I wouldn’t put it so crudely.”

“I would. I’ve seen this meal picked down to the bones. Have you ever considered that I might not want to push back, but will if I have to?”

“And is that a threat?”

“Yes.”

“You would stand against the entire Adventure Society? Diamond-rankers and all?”

“I’m not scared of long odds. I stood against the Builder. More than once. And every time I did, I got what I wanted and he went away frustrated. Will you be the next to test my resolve?”

The elevating platform reached a rooftop garden. Jason sat down in a padded, wrought iron picnic chair and Allayeth did the same, a round outdoor table between them.

“I don’t doubt your resolve, Jason. Or the threat you can pose. There is no question that you have dangerous secrets and powerful allies. Maybe if you and the Adventure Society come into conflict, you can do far more damage than anyone realises. But I don’t think you want to do that. Not unless you’re truly pushed to the brink.”

“So, you think I’ll roll over?”

“I think you have more power than anyone realises. But I also think that you won’t be able to truly change things until your more orthodox power grows stronger. You understand that as well, and that you have to bide your time. It’s why you made a show of concession with your offer to let us go to where you’re keeping the messengers.”

Jason bowed his head.

“Just because I won’t go berserk doesn’t mean I won’t walk away. I have no responsibilities here.”

“Nor did you in the Battle of Yaresh. Or the underwater mine rescue in the Storm Kingdom. Or when people who are now your team members were just thieves at the mercy of powerful political forces. You have a pattern, Jason Asano, and that pattern is that you’ll put everything on the line to help people for no more reason than they need help.”

“Why am I the one who needs to prove myself? Why do you need anything from me but my good word? I got the Builder to walk away from this entire planet, and that’s not enough? You question my trustworthiness when all I’ve seen you do is break into my home.”

“I would have liked to have done things differently.”

“Don’t come into my house to tell me that I have to do things your way and then complain that you had to do things someone else’s.”

“I apologise. But however much you dance around it, Jason, you have to put people’s minds at ease if you want to operate without harassment from the civic powers.”

“And how would I do that?”

“At the very least, let us know who is backing you. Whoever controls the other side of that portal is powerful at a level I can’t measure, and that’s who you’ve handed the messengers over to.”

Jason sat up straight, confusion on his face.

“*That’s* the problem? You’re afraid of some powerful unknown player messing around with the messengers I handed over?”

“I would have thought that was obvious.”

Jason laughed, shaking his head.

“Jason, I am willing to trust you, as is the director of the Adventure Society. But at least when Dawn was standing behind you, we had some understanding of who was taking an interest in events. I’ve met Dawn, and whatever is on the other side of that portal isn’t her.”

Jason rubbed his temples with one hand.

“No,” he said. “You pushed me and it didn’t work, so now you want me to compromise. If you want the answers that lie on the other side of that portal, you’ll need to step through it.”

“Alright.”

“What?”

“I’ll go through.”

“What about the danger? You said that you definitely wouldn’t go through. You said that minutes ago.”

“It’s possible I misrepresented myself a little in order to understand you better. My investigation into you, Jason Asano, has been swift but thorough. I’ve heard time and again that you’re hard to understand, but you’re not. You’re a good man, desperately scrambling to survive events you aren’t ready for. And every time you’re forced to choose between doing the right thing and staying alive, you make the sacrifice.”

“I don’t always do the right thing.”

“You do enough when it matters. Enough that it should have earned the trust of people like me. So, I’m going to trust you and go through that portal.”

“Uh…”

She laughed.

“You really weren’t expecting us to accept your offer, were you?”

“No, I was not. I’m a little worried about how you’ll react. And by a little worried, I mean I’m worried that you’ll kill me.”

Allayeth sighed.

“It’s starting to sound like the real gesture of trust is not to go through that portal but to accept your word that it isn’t a threat to us.”

Jason narrowed his eyes.

“Which you knew before coming here,” he said. “You’ve seen through me like a window.”

“I’d like to make a different proposal, Jason. I’ll offer you two things, and in return, we clear the slate. No more concessions, no compromises. Just cooperation. You tell us as much as you are willing about the messengers and what you’ve learned from them, and we don’t push for more. And we work together for what comes next, which I think you would do anyway.”

Jason continued to give Allayeth an assessing stare.

“So that’s why you’re here,” he said. “Jes Fin Kaal doesn’t want to talk to you. She wants to talk to me.”

Allayeth smiled in spite of herself.

“I think you and I can do good things together, Jason.”

“You said you’d offer me two things.”

“I did. Two things you very much want.”

“And they are?”

“One is trust. Trust that your intentions are good and that you are capable enough to carry them out, however unlikely that might seem. No conditions, just acceptance.”

“And the other thing?”

She plucked a plate with a large sandwich out of the air and set it on the table between them.

“A delicious sandwich,” she said.

“Do you really think that *this* will get me to come around?”

“Yes.”

“You think I’m that easy?”

“Yes.”

“It’s going to take more than some conversation with a smart and stupidly gorgeous woman to win me over. Also a sandwich.”

“A *delicious* sandwich. And no, it won’t.”

“That’s absurd.”

“Yes. But you like absurd, don’t you?”

“No. Yes.”

He ran a hand over his face.

“Oh, bloody hell,” he muttered as he reached for the sandwich.

Chapter 706

Original Design Parameters

While Jason's cloud palace was still largely occupied with servicing the displaced population of Yaresh, Jason maintained an area for himself and his companions. Part of it was a living area, with Sophie and Belinda in one room and the boys in a bunk dorm to save space. Sophie's mother, Melody, was in a secure room adjacent to her daughter, while other members of the convoy were stashed elsewhere. Amos Pensinata was staying with his nephew's team in their vehicle, and Rufus' mother, Arabelle, was staying with her old team member, Emir. Emir's cloud palace was being used much like Jason's, and he had even more room that he could put to use.

The open space between the two cloud palaces had been a refugee camp until the battle pounded it into a mud pit, but earth shapers had already established a new series of crude but functional stone buildings. One part of it had been left clear, a flat stone area that served as an arrival destination for portals. The towns to the south were still being cleared of world-taker worms, with the cloud palaces serving as processing centres for surviving townsfolk.

Rain was coming down heavily as a portal opened that did not come from the southern towns but from a city half a continent to the north. Three people stepped through and Jason, inside his cloud palace, immediately sensed their presence. He stepped through a Shade body to shadow jump to them, rising from Travis Noble's shadow like he was riding an elevator.

Travis stumbled back, startled. He was from Earth, a specialist in magical technology. His precise specialisation was large-scale weaponry but, like Clive, he was an enthusiastic researcher whose expertise bled into a variety of adjacent fields.

Farrah laughed as Jason appeared and the rain stopped falling straight down, curving around them as Jason's aura pushed it out of the way. Jason grinned as he clasped Farrah in a hug.

"You paid a gold-ranker to portal you here?"

"The Church of Knowledge did," the third new arrival informed him. It was Gabrielle Pellin, priestess of the Church of Knowledge and Humphrey's ex-girlfriend.

Jason spared Gabrielle a glance as he stepped back from Farrah. He and Gabrielle did not get along very well, which had been a factor in ending her relationship with Humphrey. She was now attached to Farrah and Travis' current project to combine Earth technology with Pallimustus magic to create a new communication network.

“Let’s go inside,” Jason said, nodding in the direction of his cloud palace. “More people are portalling in on the regular, so we should avoid clogging up the arrival site.”

The cloud palace was, at the moment, a blank slab that looked like a Soviet Bloc construction. Compared to the adventurer vehicles around it that were all exotic mobile fortresses, the starkness and size of it stood out. Arrayed in front of its four storeys were stone-shaped buildings that matched the bleakness of the current cloud palace with boxy designs and hard edges. The wide pathways in between were simple, just large flagstones set into the dirt. The value of this was evident as the rain turned that dirt into mud, saving the many people around from needing to trudge through it.

Even with the rain, there was no shortage of people around them as Jason led the trio in the direction of his cloud palace. Some people were ignoring the rain while others hustled to move through it quickly. More than a few had water-repelling umbrellas, much like one Jason used to have. The expensive umbrellas had water slide off smoothly, much as Jason’s aura did. The cheap ones sent water spraying off violently, annoying anyone who lack their own water repulsion. This often included other users of cheap umbrellas, which often didn’t shield from the sides.

They came across a pair of men with cheap umbrellas that had managed to splash each other. On the verge of getting into a fight, Jason used his aura to introduce a subtle but pervasive sense of calm. The men exchanged more insults but didn’t come to blows, storming off in different directions.

“Did you...?” Farrah asked, giving Jason a side glance as they moved on.

“A little bit,” he admitted.

“You’re directly influencing people now?”

He chuckled.

“No, it’s not influencing people as such. It’s more like tweaking the feel of a room. Have you ever been around a bunch of people, having a good time, and then someone comes in and announces that something bad has happened?”

“Sure.”

“The atmosphere of the room goes from fun to tense or unhappy straight away right?”

“I’ve felt that, yeah,” Travis said.

“What I did was something like that,” Jason explained.

“I wouldn’t even know how to even attempt that kind of aura control,” Farrah said.

“It’s a messenger trick,” Jason said. “They use it to make impressive entrances or cow their slaves. It’s like background music in a film; the people involved can’t hear it, but it impacts the mood.”

“Where did you learn to use your aura like a messenger?” Gabrielle asked, her tone accusatory.

“Your boss didn't tell you where I learned it?” Jason teased her. He noticed unease in Travis' aura at the hostility between himself and Gabrielle.

“My lady delights in her followers seeking knowledge for themselves.”

“I can respect that,” Jason conceded. “I learned that messenger trick from a messenger.”

“You would traffic with the enemy?”

“The enemy in question is my prisoner, and he has a lot of free time.”

The teleport arrival area where they had started out was midway between Jason and Emir's cloud palaces. As they were the destinations for most of the people out in the rain, Jason and the trio of new arrivals were part of a flow heading for Jason's palace. Farrah looked up at it as they drew closer to the plain building.

“Why did you make it look so bland?” Farrah asked. “Just looking at it makes me feel forlorn.”

“It does look like an insane asylum from an eighties movie,” Travis agreed.

“It just came out that way,” Jason said. “I may have been influenced by the priestess in charge.”

“They put a priestess of the god of Desolation in charge of managing all these homeless people?” Farrah asked. “That's not a good choice.”

“It's a priestess of Fertility running things now. There was a Healer priestess, but she moved central operations to Emir's palace yesterday. They're focused on filtering out anyone who's worm-infested, while my place is pretty much doing food now. I tore the whole building down overnight and put it back up as a multi-storey food court. The Fertility church is supplying all the food, so their priestess is running the show now.

Farrah stopped and looked up at the building again. The other stopped with her.

“A priestess of Fertility,” Farrah said.

“Yep,” Jason confirmed.

“The Church of Fertility where their temples are all covered in murals of people... being fertile.”

“That's the one.”

She gestured at the blank, grey walls of the building.

“How does a priestess of Fertility inspire this?”

“I think it's because I *really* don't want her thinking about fertility-related things. But honestly, the Healer priestess was just as bad, but for different reasons. I'll give you a

sample of what she was serving in the cafeteria before I fixed it and you'll understand. Speaking of churches, though, what is Humphrey's fundamentalist ex-girlfriend doing with you?"

Gabrielle glowered but didn't rise to the bait. Instead, Travis explained the Church of Knowledge's role in his and Farrah's project. The church wanted input into what Farrah and especially Travis were doing, making sure that any otherworldly knowledge introduced wouldn't be false or damaging. This was not proving an issue as Travis actually knew what he was talking about, compared to Jason's fumbling efforts to explain scientific concepts. In return for being allowed to observe, the Church of Knowledge was providing resources and contacts.

"After all," Travis pointed out, "greatly improved mass communication would be a boon for the dissemination of Knowledge."

"I can't say that I'd be up for letting the gods dip a finger into my porridge," Jason said, "but it's your project. If you're happy, that's what matters."

He glanced at Gabrielle.

"Just make sure you aren't letting them participate for the wrong reasons," he added.

Gabrielle had already been astoundingly beautiful at seventeen when Jason first met her. Now that she was out of her teens and into silver-rank, she would be a casting director's dream Helen of Troy.

"I, unfortunately, had the opportunity to test out the weapons you designed for the cloud palace," Jason said, changing the subject. "I was a little surprised with the end result, to be honest. I was expecting something more like Gatling lasers than techno-eyebeam things.

"I'm not sure that 'designed' is entirely the right word," Travis said. "Your cloud palace has such powerful adaptive properties that it was far more efficient to provide it tools it could use to its own ends. Trying to force a specific result would be inefficient, not to mention fruitless unless I knew a lot more about how cloud flasks work."

"That's all well and good," Jason said, "and the results were excellent, don't get me wrong. But I really would have liked something with spinning barrels."

"Of course you would," Travis agreed. "Spinning barrels are awesome. I put them on the latest version of the Compensator."

Jason recalled Travis' unfortunately named personal firearm, a wildly impractical, belt-fed pistol. Travis was not a combat-oriented essence-user, despite possessing the gun essence. The Compensator was designed to make up for his lack of skill by allowing him to unload a surplus of ammunition. Sadly, the gun was as ill-conceived in design as in

name. Not only was it unwieldy, even with an essence user's strength, but everyone assumed it was compensating for something else entirely.

"Are you still using that thing?" Jason asked him.

"Well, not using," Travis said. "I haven't been in combat since..."

He thought it over.

"...since you broke into my workplace to steal a weapon of mass destruction."

"I wouldn't exactly describe that as combat," Farrah said. "The only person who pointed a gun at you was on your own side. It was that girl you liked, which can't have been a great moment for you."

"Could you please not?" Travis asked her, his voice almost a squeak.

"What weapon of mass destruction?" Gabrielle asked. "Was it like the one that felled the Builder's flying fortress city?"

"Yep," Jason said cheerfully. "Some people wanted me to do a thing, but I thought why not blow it all up with a weapon that can flatten a city?"

"You are a reckless maniac."

Jason gave Gabrielle a look that she couldn't quite read but made her flinch despite his not enhancing it with aura.

"As a priestess of Knowledge, you shouldn't have such strong opinions on things you know very little about," he told her in a flat tone. He gave no indication of having recognised the wild hypocrisy in his statement.

"You know," Jason said, turning back to Travis as the joviality returned to his voice. "There's someone floating around who knows about cloud flask mechanics, if you're interested in learning more about integrating weapons into them. She made the flasks that Emir and I use, and she's been staying with Emir. She's been poking around at my building for a little while now. I think she installed some back doors she's trying to get to work."

"And you just let her try that?" Travis asked.

"She's diamond-rank, what am I going to do? She doesn't seem to be getting anywhere, though. I've modified the flask beyond its original design parameters."

"You know how to do that?" Travis asked.

"No," Jason said with a laugh. "No, I do not."

They approached the main doors where people were filtering in under the guidance of clergy and other staff. Jason ignored the main doors and moved around the side, lifting his feet off the ground as the stone pathways gave way to mud around the parts of the building that didn't lead to doors.

“You move like a messenger,” Gabrielle accused.

“I tried walking like an Egyptian,” Jason told her, “but it was slower, gunked up my boots and left these little troughs in the mud for other people to navigate.”

“I see you are still a fool,” Gabrielle said.

“Actually, I dabbled in edgelord for quite a while there. It didn't work out. I've been working on myself, trying to get back to fool, and I'm pretty happy with how it's going. And how is your project going, Farrah? I'm assuming you're not here for a social visit or you wouldn't have brought Little Miss Grumpy.”

“We need to borrow your soul space,” Travis explained. “We need to do a bunch of tests on a bunch of materials, all of which are quite expensive. It'll be a lot cheaper if we can just replicate them over and over. We brought samples, obviously, so you can reproduce the material accurately.”

“You realise I'm not just a laboratory for you to run experiments in, right?” Jason asked.

“Where's Gary right now?” Farrah asked casually. “And, I'm guessing, Clive?”

“In my soul space,” Jason grumbled. “Running experiments.”

They reached the back portion of the palace that Jason had for the use of himself and his team. Rufus came out to pull Farrah into a hug and Travis held out his hand for Taika to shake. Taika ignored Travis' hand and pulled the skinny, alarmed-looking man into a giant chocolate hug. Aside from Jason, they had been the only two people from Earth in Rimaros, two strangers in a strange land.

They moved inside out of the rain, the cloud floor cleaning boots while people were still wearing them. Gabrielle looked like she'd bitten into a lemon as Jason's spirit domain cut her off from her goddess.

Chapter 707

Unstable

Jason and his team, including new member Taika, headed to Emir's palace for a meeting. With them were Farrah, Gary and Travis, while Gabrielle had long gone off to find members of her own clergy. She would arrive at the meeting with them.

Using Emir's palace as the venue made sense purely from a space perspective, as Jason's smaller palace lacked the room. Emir had also dedicated most of his home's space to facilities aiding the displaced population of Yareh, but his larger palace could at least spare the space to accommodate a large meeting.

It was worth breaking down and rebuilding Jason's palace when the main purpose became hosting a massive food court. It wasn't worth doing the same with Emir's in the middle of the day just to hold a meeting. Emir lacked Jason's ability to remake whole rooms on a structural level without returning the cloud construct to the flask and remaking the entire building. This meant that, instead of a dedicated meeting room, they had to make do with the space he already had available.

"A bouncy house?" Taika asked as they walked in. "Bro, this is awesome."

He immediately made a superhuman leap into the middle of the room, spilling head over heels through the air as he skipped like a stone. This drew raised eyebrows from the people already present who were leaning against the walls.

"It was Jason's idea," Emir said as he arrived right behind Jason's team, having come from elsewhere in the palace. "Too many children have been through too much unpleasantness, so it's nice to give them some silly fun for a little while."

Emir entered the room and set cloud furniture rising from the floor. The chairs and couches all faced one side of the room that remained empty aside from Taika bouncing around, ignoring the disapproving glares. The chairs and couches were plush cloud material but nothing like the bounce-inducing floor. The people present immediately started to occupy the furniture, Arabelle and Rufus claiming a couch, as did Emir and Constance, Emir's wife. While it was Emir's cloud palace, Constance, was the one who ran it. That had been true when she was Emir's chief of staff, and nothing had changed on becoming his spouse.

There was also a significant number of clergy. The Healer was represented by Arabelle and Neil, as well as Carlos Quilido and Hana Shavar, who grabbed another couch near the front. The rest of the clergy were in two contingents of silver-rankers, each led by

a gold. One group were priests and priestesses of Knowledge, including Gabrielle, while the other was from the Church of War.

The attire of the Knowledge clergy marked them as warrior scholars. This was not uncommon, with the goddess Knowledge having been quietly militarising her forces for years. This had caused consternation amongst the other churches as the scale of it was revealed, particularly with the Church of War. They had often matched the Church of Knowledge's unexplained build-up, often in the same areas. When the messengers subsequently invaded those areas, the Knowledge's motives had been revealed, with the Church of War being in place to respond.

The attire of the War priests and priestesses was a lot less scholar and a lot more warrior. Gabrielle and her companions wore robes not unlike the ones Jason preferred, albeit in lighter colours than he used. They looked like Jedi to Jason's Sith in outfits that were free-flowing and loose without obstructing movement. The clergy of War were dressed in armour ranging from flexible leather to heavily plated outfits, even though they were here for a meeting. Jason wondered how they were ever comfortable without cloud furniture to sink into.

More people arrived after Jason and his friends, starting with Rick Geller and his team. Next came the team led by Korinne Pescos, Rimaros adventurers travelling with Jason. This included their latest team member, Zara Nareen, formerly Zara Rimaros, Hurricane Princess of the Storm Kingdom. She had been adopted into her mother's family so she could roam around without quite as much stink of royalty on her. Also on that team was Orin Pensinata, whose uncle, Amos, arrived with them.

The final arrivals were officials from both the Adventure Society and the Ducal Palace, the government of the Yareh city-state. The director of the local Adventure Society branch led their contingent, while the Ducal delegation was led by a blank-faced bureaucrat. Both men were gold rank, their status achieved through monster core use. This was standard for high-ranking bureaucrats, as their silver-rank flunkies also had auras thick with monster core energy.

Each group had a pair of gold-rankers with them, not adventurers but also not core users. These were personal guards, ex-adventurers lured by offers of slightly less money but significantly less monster fighting. The Adventure Society maintained a force of such personnel outside of their normal membership, as did many high-end branches. The Ducal Palace had something similar, with even the Duke of greenstone maintaining a similar practice.

Vidal Ladiv was amongst the Adventure Society contingent, standing out through the absence of monster residue in his aura.

Jason found the social dynamics fascinating as the people in the room shuffled for chairs in a political game simultaneously played out in aura interactions. Jason glanced at Farrah, reminded of their first lesson in aura manipulation. She had told him how adventurers and other powerful essence users used their auras like handshakes, which was explanation enough for a guy no one had heard of learning to meditate in a park. In high society, it was a subtle and complex game of supremacy.

While the silver-rankers were shuffled to the back, gold-rankers fought over seating positions without looking like they were, shuffling awkwardly between the furniture. There was an aura game being played as well, not reliant on power but nuance, at which the monster-core using bureaucrats were surprisingly good. The goal was to align with the more prominent people in the room, namely the famous gold-rank adventurers, rather than being stuck at the back with the silver-rankers.

There were exceptions to pure rank amongst the odd social dynamic. Zara Nareen, as daughter to the Storm King, held a prominence above her rank. Jason also held an odd position, and one that most of the gold-rankers didn't know what to do with. The government bureaucrat and his gold-rank guards tried to influence Jason fairly crudely, his sleek aura defence deflecting it easily.

In Pallimustus, personal power trumped political influence. This made Emir, Amos and Arabelle, all renowned adventurers, the islands around which the rest of the room drifted. Amongst the silver-rankers this was reflected as well, with the officials playing second-fiddle to Jason, Rick and Korinne's teams. The clergy were somewhere in the middle, commanding respect as the servants of the gods, but lacking the personal achievements of battle-hardened adventurers.

Things had almost settled down when the arrival of the diamond-rank Allayeth threw the room into a subtextual frenzy of politely claiming chairs. She could have tamped her aura down to avoid unnerving the group, especially the silver-rankers. But there was an expectation of an imposing presence from a diamond-ranker. Violating that to make people comfortable was more a breach of etiquette than leaving them unsettled.

Jason was the only completely unfazed silver-ranker, although Zara, Rufus and Humphrey faked it very well. The gold-rankers had mixed results when masking the discomfort of their auras. Emir had spent more time with diamond-rankers than anyone in the room who wasn't one. His wife was fairly new to gold-rank but maintained the perfect

equanimity of a hostess. Amos Pensinata was bold enough to forcibly shrug off the aura, having the gall to use it as training.

The two gold-rank priests also showed admirable resolve, being used to the presence of their gods. Even a diamond-ranker on the level of Dawn could not outshine that. It was the gold-rankers who had arrived with the various officials who were most visibly ill at ease, but there was no shame in that. If anything, it was ruder to not show the effects of being in a diamond-ranker's presence. The priests were particularly good at showing just the right level of being impacted.

Most of the silver-rankers looked sweaty, as if Allayeth was a box of hot rocks in a sauna. Jason's team had encountered Dawn enough times that they weren't too off-kilter, but the other teams and the officials were looking queasy as they took their seats at the rear.

Finally, everyone was seated, with gold-rankers at the front and silver-rankers at the back. Up front was Emir, the host, with his wife next to him as they shared a couch. Allayeth, as the most powerful, was front and centre. Jason ignored glares backed by gold-rank auras as he sat next to her; if she was happy to make small talk with him, no one was stupid enough to try and send him to the back with the other silver-rankers.

"Jason," Allayeth said. "I know I agreed to refrain from probing you with questions, but can you at least share what happened to the messenger's diamond-ranker?"

Although her tone was casual, it arrested every ear in the room. One of the greatest mysteries of the Battle of Yareh was what happened to the most powerful combatant on the messenger side.

"Honestly, I have no idea," Jason said, with only Allayeth able to read his aura well enough to know he was telling the truth. "I'd never heard of the guy until he rocked up dead at my feet. It was probably a god or something."

"Is that something you'd consider likely?" Allayeth asked.

"Something swatted a diamond-ranker like a fly, and the only mortals I know that could do that are off transcending or in prison."

"Prison?"

"From what I understand. Everything's always more than you think when you only know the basics."

"Did you know that there was a strong residual magic of time manipulation in the area?" Allayeth asked.

"So I've heard. I also heard that the Adventure Society was hoping to keep the details of the investigation as secret as they are able."

“Ah,” Allayeth said before looking to the Adventure Society director, standing in front of all the chairs. “My apologies, Director Heath.”

“Thank you, Lady Allayeth.”

The director of the Adventure Society and the gold-rank priest of Knowledge were the only ones who remained standing, positioning themselves at the side of the room all the chairs were facing. Like most Yaresh locals, the two men were elves.

“Thank you all for coming,” the director said. “For those of you I have yet to meet, I am Musin Heath, director of the Adventure Society’s Yaresh branch. As most of you are aware, this meeting is to discuss the latest moves by the messengers and what our response will be. I will begin by making sure that everyone present knows the situation as it currently stands.”

An illusion lit up behind him showing a map of the Yaresh region. It was zoomed well out, clearly marking the city of Yaresh, the towns to the south infested with world-taker worms and the projected area in which the worms were suspected to have spread. The director pointed out the messenger fortresses, including the one that had been abandoned.

“The messenger strongholds, and now our city, have been the focal points of the battles between our forces and those of the messengers,” Musin explained. “Neither of these are the true crux of this conflict, however.”

The map panned to a location some distance away, where a range of mountainous plateaus rose out of the jungle.

“The true objective of the messengers lies deep beneath this mountain range; a natural array, unnoticed for centuries, deep in the ground below us. For those of you unaware, a natural array is a location where magical manifestations, taking place over centuries, have slowly formed a cluster of objects that generate unanticipated magical effects. A natural array is an exciting resource, but not to the point of justifying the effort and attention the invading messengers have put into controlling it. Which leads to the question of what they truly want.”

Musin pointed out a mark on one of the plateaus.

“This is the location of the shaft the messengers had their slaves dig to the natural array. We do not know what they want, but we do have an amount of information about their activities. Priest Jillet, I invite you to share what you have managed to put together.”

The knowledge Priest stepped forward as Musin stepped back.

“My name is Ebson Jillet. I am a priest of Knowledge and chief information officer of the combined holy forces in this region. Before anyone asks, the goddess of Knowledge

cannot give us all the information about the disposition of the enemy. That would not only violate her purview but also encroach upon the god of War's."

He gestured at the map.

"My goddess guided us to this region, from which point it became our divine mandate to learn why. What we found was that as soon as the messengers arrived, they began excavating all but right under our noses, using the suborned labour of this world's natives. We naturally sought out the reason why, but it still eludes us. Even the slaves, traitors and messengers we've captured and interrogated gave us conflicting information. We believe that the leadership of the messenger forces has been lying even to her own people."

"By leadership, you mean Jes Fin Kaal," Allayeth said. "The Voice of the Will."

"I do," Jillet said. "This messenger is a direct servant of a transcendent entity called a astral king, whose agenda we assume her to be carrying out. We believe that she is telling different stories even to her own people to contain whatever the truth is. Despite this, we have managed to put together a basic idea of events. The messengers arrived in the region and secretly initiated an excavation program far from where the holy army was camped. This was inefficient but kept their activities from us for some time. They sought the natural array we did not know existed. Then they found it and were no longer able to hide their activities. Instead of a buried array, they found an entire sub-species of the smoulder people in a centuries-old underground civilisation."

"What do you mean by sub-species?" one of the government officials asked.

"Normal smoulders," the director stepped forward to say, "are a people that, like elves, humans, celestines or leonids, have a sufficiently low inherent magic level that they can absorb essences. If a sufficient population is exposed to sufficient magic over a sufficient number of generations, that population may become a magical variant, as has occurred here. You may have heard of the Blood Song Leonids or the Sky Eater Elves. I'm oversimplifying but, in short, the smoulders down there have their own inherent magic instead of essences."

"What's more," Jillet continued, "these people were at war with the Builder cult, just like the rest of us. Unbeknownst to anyone on the surface, the cult had discovered the city and a large astral space. We believe the space was either created or altered by the natural array, and the Builder sent a powerful force to claim it. Not only did the cult have an array of gold-rankers leading an army of silvers, but also burrowing machines to approach the city unnoticed by us on the surface. They were still waging war on the smoulder population until the messengers arrived, turning it into a three-way conflict. This was the point where we discovered the magical emanations of this subterranean war."

Jillet nodded in the direction of the gold-rank War priest.

“At this point, we joined the battle, but we were still trying to understand what was happening. We know that the messengers attempted to alter the natural array somehow, and that whatever they did went wrong. The astral space was warped and the messengers started to be negatively affected. They fled, leaving the cult, the smoulder and what seems to be a large number of mindless, altered messengers to their conflict underground.”

“The messengers realised that the holy forces knew about them and have been fighting over control of the underground excavation access ever since. Yaresh was supplying the holy forces for months, along with a steady stream of adventurer reinforcements. The messengers had their own massive reinforcement at this time, however, right at the time the Builder was withdrawing from our world. The new messengers bolstered the existing ones and established the strongholds we've been besieging ever since.”

“What about the Builder cult members underground?” Arabelle asked. “Were they withdrawn along with the Builder’s other forces?”

“No,” Musin answered. “Builder cult groups around the world had their resources revoked and any non-natives forces withdrawn. The Pallimustus natives who signed on with the cult were left behind and we’ve been cleaning them up ever since. You wouldn’t have seen it in the Storm Kingdom, where the Builder had already withdrawn, but Adventure Society branches around the world have been mopping them up.”

“What we know,” Jillet said, “is that Builder cult members remain underground. What we don’t is whether they are a remnant native force that poses little threat or a powerful army prevented from extraction by the now-unstable natural array.”

“Which brings us to the main issue,” the director said. “Whatever the messengers did, the natural array is no longer stable. Some kind of magic is building up down there, and we need to either stabilise or destroy the source before it escalates beyond our ability to handle. Assuming it hasn’t already.”

“And how do we do that?” Emir asked.

“Someone has offered an alliance for the purpose of putting a stop to it. They claim to have the expertise but are unable to send their own people, who have proven vulnerable to the magical forces at play. I think most of you in this room are well-informed enough to realise that I’m talking about the messengers. Jes Fin Kaal has made us an offer.”

Chapter 708

Dark Bargain

Auras erupted in consternation after Musin Heath, the Adventure Society director, announced a potential alliance with the messenger leader. The gold-rankers held their equanimity, but many of the silver-rankers were spiritually up in arms. It was here that the director demonstrated his expertise, spreading his aura out to gently chide the silver-rankers, forcibly imposing calm through deft aura suppression. The director might not be an expert at handling monsters, but the veteran administrator was the Amos Pensinata of controlling an unruly meeting.

“Yes,” the director said. “Obviously, the idea of an alliance with the woman responsible for levelling the city is unpalatable. And make no mistake: she is responsible. We know the plan to attack the city was hers. I am aware of every reason to be angry. Most of you aren’t from this city and you’re furious. I am from this city. This is my home and this woman ground it under her boot. I lost people in the attack. Every friend I have lost people in the attack. If I can muster up the resolve to look at things the way they are and not the way I wish they were, so can all of you.”

He panned his gaze across the room as the people in the meeting settled down. Ebson Jillet, priest of Knowledge, stepped forward.

“The simple fact is,” he stated, “that there is a greater threat to this city than the messengers, although they are the source of this danger as well. We have explained the instability that has affected the natural array. The equilibrium that is the most intrinsic property of such an array is out of balance, and breaking that balance would normally cause the magic of the array to dissipate. Whatever the messengers did to it, that is very much not what happened. Instead of breaking down, the array has been growing in power, at the cost of stability.”

“It took a long time for us to notice the change,” Musin said, picking up the narrative. “The array is feeding on ambient mana that has picked up earth and fire affinities, the purest strains of which come from deep underground. For this reason, it took a long time before we noticed what was happening from the surface. Only once the array started reaching dangerous power levels did we realise and start investigating. The best assessment the Magic Society has is that the power will continue to build to a tipping point where the array can no longer maintain stability. All that power will then be unleashed in catastrophic fashion. Our best estimates place that happening sometime in the next three to five months.”

“How catastrophic?” Emir asked.

“The Magic Society has been using the term supervolcano,” Jillet said. “I looked it up in our historical records, and that term was used for a natural event more than twenty thousand years ago. So, to answer your question based on what I found, I would say extremely catastrophic”

“We should probably stop that, then,” Emir said.

“That was also the conclusion we reached, Mr Bahadir,” Musin said. “Unfortunately, the Magic Society has been coming up short in terms of solutions.”

“We lack the knowledge base,” Clive called out from the back. “The Magic Society—”

“Shut your mouth, silver,” one of the gold-rankers guarding the government contingent growled. “The adults are talking.”

A silver-rank aura settled over the room. The strength of it approached gold-rank and there were unsettling elements that were hard to read, like silhouettes in a fog. Then it withdrew and all eyes were on Jason. He showed no indication of having just let his aura blanket the room like a poison cloud and leaned towards Allayeth. They held a whispered conversation as if they couldn't be heard by everyone in the room.

“I don't like people talking to my friends like that,” he mentioned offhandedly. “I'm trying to be less imperious, though. I don't suppose you could be imperious for me?”

“You'd owe me one,” Allayeth said lightly.

“I can live with that.”

“I wouldn't go making assumptions, Jason,” she teased and he flashed her a grin.

A portal opened and whips lashed out from the other side, wrapping around the limbs, torso and head of the gold-ranker that had scolded Clive. The gold-ranker's aura was crushed and the whips yanked him through the portal which immediately vanished.

“An offensive portal ability,” Jason said appreciatively. “Used inside Emir's cloud palace, no less. Being diamond-rank will be nice.”

“You think you'll be a diamond-ranker?”

“For a while, sure,” he said distractedly. “What were you saying, Clive? Something about a knowledge base?”

The room was silent and still for a long moment, all attention laser-focused on Jason and Allayeth. The diamond-ranker herself was giving Jason an assessing look as he watched Clive attentively.

“Uh...” Clive said, and Jason gave him an encouraging nod. Clive's eyes flickered over the diamond-ranker and he continued.

“As I said,” Clive explained hesitantly, “we lack the knowledge base to do anything with natural arrays. And by ‘we,’ I mean the Magic Society and, by extension, the entire magical research community of Pallimustus. Partly the problem is that natural arrays are rare, but the main issue is internal Magic Society politics. Because of their rarity and lucrative research potential, the people who get the chance to study them have started hoarding the results of their research instead of disseminating it, despite the dissemination of research being the entire point of the Magic Society.”

“Why would they do that?” Humphrey asked.

“Because the next time a natural array comes up,” Clive said, “the people most likely permitted to research it will be those that know the most.”

“Which leads,” Knowledge Priest Jillet said with disapproval, “to a situation where too few people are participating in the research of a field of knowledge. On top of that, those who end up doing the research are the ones who were best at politics, not magical study.”

“Exactly,” Clive glowered, sharing an understanding grimace with the Knowledge Priest.

“The result,” Jillet told the room, “is that, as Mr Standish here said, we lack the knowledge base. The Magic Society attached researchers to the forces contesting the entrance to the underground excavation as soon as we realised what was down there, but they don’t have any response to what’s happening.”

“In fairness,” Musin said, “I don’t know to what degree expertise would help. They never had direct access to study it and were left trying to analyse the distant aura from the surface.”

“The only thing that would accomplish is removing an easy excuse for the incapability,” Clive muttered, with Jillet nodding his agreement.

“In short,” Musin said, “no one from this world understands how to stop the array from annihilating Yaresh and all the towns and villages around it. Which brings us to the messengers. They have magical expertise that we do not.”

“That should not be news to anyone familiar with the new magic that has been spreading over the last few years,” Jillet said. “As to whether that expertise extends to resolving this situation or they are just lying remains an open question. Whatever insidious pact the messengers struck with the Builder cult and what we believed was the Church of Purity, it involved sharing magic not available on this world. A lot of that we’ve managed to capture and add to our own store of magical knowledge. My church has been a large part of that, as has Mr Standish, here.”

He gestured at a nervous Clive.

“If any of you have enjoyed the improved astral magic being spread over the last few years, you should thank Mr Standish.”

Clive shook his head.

“All of that work was based on materials given to me by the Church of Knowledge,” he said. “More precisely, they were given to Jason and I kind of stole them all.”

Clive’s expression became awkward.

“Then he took them back to another universe and I was given my own copies,” he admitted, his words coming out in a rush. Jillet laughed.

“Yes, Mr Standish. Do you truly think you came into possession of that material by accident? A book is worthless if no one can read what is inside. You took what were worthless scribbles on a page and turned them into knowledge. Then — and this is important — you shared that knowledge.”

“Eventually,” Clive grumbled.

Clive had been lured into researching astral magic used by the Builder cult following Jason’s seeming demise. This was when the enthusiastic researcher from a small magic Society branch discovered how riddled the institution was with self-serving politics. He had thought the corruption of his local director to be an isolated incident, but the self-serving behaviour and lack of ethics proved to be an unfortunate standard.

With no influential background, Clive was kidnapped in all but name and exploited by a high-ranking official. It was only with the help of Belinda and a sympathetic fellow researcher that he made good his escape. His complaints lodged with the Adventure Society and Magic Society prompted little and no action respectively. He resigned from both his employment and membership in the Magic Society and publicly released all the work he had done while under the society's thumb.

It was only a matter of time before the Magic Society realised the treasure they had lost in Clive. They had been trying to lure him back ever since but he hadn’t come close to being tempted. He still pursued his research interests, using the Church of Knowledge to spread any fruit produced by his personal research. The clergy of Knowledge’s church were very nice to Clive.

“The point is,” Musin said, “that the messengers have magic that we do not. And they claim they can prevent the natural array from growing into a catastrophe that destroys what’s left of our city.”

“We can’t trust them, obviously,” Emir said. “The best you can hope for is to trust you know what they want and can predict them accordingly, and that is a dangerous game.”

“It is,” Musin agreed. “But we’re desperate and they know it. While we don’t know exactly what they want, we know they can’t get it for themselves and we can leverage that advantage. They need us. The next step is to learn more about what they want, or at least what they claim to want.”

“If we help them get whatever they’ve been after this whole time,” Carlos called out angrily, “then what was the point of fighting them in the first place? And how do we know that what they’re after isn’t even worse than the natural array exploding? What if they get us to turn the array into a volcano weapon they can take from city to city, wiping out our civilisation?”

“That’s... one potential scenario, I suppose,” Musin said. “I don’t think any of us believe that we should let the messengers get what they want. But the reality is, they have a want and we have a need. If we fail to stop the array from going completely out of control, Yaresh is gone and the whole region will be uninhabitable. Even if we evacuate the whole region, the volcano will bring desolation, blotting out the sky. So soon after the monster surge, it may even damage the still-fragile dimensional membrane, causing additional monster manifestations. Elementals of fire, ash and magma in almost monster surge numbers, roaming out to spread the desolation even further.”

“No one is suggesting we do nothing,” Emir said. “But we’re talking about a vicious and cruel enemy who will sacrifice her forces to hurt ours even worse. They lost a diamond-ranker attacking this city and I’ve seen no indication she even cares.”

“Actually,” Musin said, “we believe the diamond-ranker’s death may have been one of Jes Fin Kaal’s intentions. Given the unusual nature of his death, she may have even arranged his assassination using the battle to hide it. We would need to know more of the event in question to confirm anything, but not all parties involved have proven willing to share.”

The room’s occupants once again turned their eyes to Jason, who looked up from the drink he was mixing, ingredients held floating in front of him by his aura.

“What?” he asked innocently. The director shook his head and continued.

“Messengers have their own politics, and the absence of a local diamond-rank messenger has left the Voice of the Will as the solitary authority. It’s possible that the entire attack was simply a messenger power play.”

“And you want to make a deal with someone willing to wage war on a city full of innocent people for only that,” Carlos said. “We have diamond-rankers and they don’t anymore. We should plunder their strongholds and steal their magic before a new diamond-ranker arrives to reinforce them.”

“An approach that has been discussed, certainly,” Musin said. “Discussed and rejected. We could eliminate the remaining messenger strongholds, yes, but the cost in adventurer lives would be prohibitive. We’ve lost enough, and there were compelling reasons that we never threw away the lives required to overrun the strongholds. You are free to try and convince lady Allayeth to change her mind, however. She would not be amongst the casualties.”

Carlos looked at the diamond-ranker, bowed his head and sat back in his chair, done.

“If I read this situation correctly,” Emir said to Musin, “your plan is to form an alliance with Jes Fin Kaal, who will absolutely betray us, and betray her better and first.”

“It’s not a good plan,” Musin confessed, “but days are desperate. In the end, we must do what we have always done: trust in adventurers to keep us safe. The people in this room represent power and knowledge in many fields. You are the best we can muster.”

“I can’t help but notice,” Jason said, “that natural array expertise is not one of those many fields. That strikes me as an odd omission, as does the absence of anyone from the Magic Society. The closest we have here are adventurers with Magic Society membership. No actual officials; no researchers. Not even a spokesperson functionary. Is there a problem with the Magic Society, director?”

It was not Musin but Jillet who answered.

“The natural array experts, as it turned out, were hiding the scope of the natural array problem. They told no one and continued their research until the city was attacked. After the attack, they warned us finally of the danger the array presents. In a final report left behind when they quietly departed the city.”

“The director of the Magical Society claimed he had no authority to force their return,” Musin said. “I requested new natural array experts, but that request is pending. The fact that I was told that by the Magic Society’s deputy director, due to the director’s sudden sabbatical, does not fill me with confidence.”

“Sounds about right,” Clive grumbled.

“It comes down to this,” Musin said. “Our options are to abandon and evacuate the entire region or make a dark bargain with the messengers and hope that we can outplay them when the time comes. We have the advantage of their inability to go anywhere near the array.”

“And they have the advantage of having the first idea of what’s actually happening,” Emir said. “I’m hearing nothing but bad ideas built on guesswork, assumption and a level of optimism I can only describe as ill-founded. We have months before this disaster, yes? Yareh is already little more than an ash heap and half the region’s towns are infested with

world-conquering parasites. Perhaps the time and resources currently earmarked for reconstruction would do more good preparing to contain the eruption of the natural array. Minimise the damage to this and the surrounding regions.”

The room got extremely tense, with the Yaresh residents filled with hostility towards Emir. This included Allayeth whose aura settled on Emir like concrete shoulder pads.

“This meeting,” she said in a voice so cold her breath almost fogged up, “is about saving this city. If you are unwilling to accept that as an absolute objective, Mr Bahadir, then we will thank you for the venue and thank you to leave the room while we continue discussing how to save our home.”

Emir threw his hands up in surrender.

“Alright,” he said. “I just think that any discussion should table every option, even if they’re dismissed out of hand.”

“Then consider your suggestion dismissed, Mr Bahadir,” Musin said. He then took a dimensional satchel slung over his shoulder and opened it, removing a cube covered in glowing runes.

“A table if you please, Mr Bahadir.”

A small cloud table rose in front of the director and he placed the cube down. He tapped at the runes in a complex sequence than involved turning the cube on its various sides. The glow faded, rune by rune until they had all dimmed. Musin opened one side of the cube and removed a slightly smaller but otherwise identical cube and repeated the sequence.

“Constance,” Jason said, “if there’s another Rubik’s babushka in there, I’m putting out a snack table. Is that okay?”

“Why are you asking her and not me?” Emir complained. Constance and Jason both looked at him and his expression wilted to a sulk.

There was no third cube but a blue sphere, twice the size of a fist.

“We’ve spoken about the messengers having magic more advanced than ours,” Musin said. “This is a messenger communication stone through which we can contact Jes Fin Kaal. As we cannot be sure if she can spy on us through this device, we had it under as much restriction as was remotely practical. But there is one more element that I have not raised. The messenger leader is only willing to continue discussion if Jason Asano is involved.”

“Is that because she wants a snack table as well?” Jason asked. “I need to find out about messenger cuisine, although I’m not optimistic. I’m picturing a lot of bran.”

Chapter 709

Decorum

A large group of mostly very serious people were having a meeting in a room with a bouncy house floor. The attendees were looking at a blue orb sitting on a table.

“This device was delivered to us by a messenger from the, er, messengers,” said Musin Heath. “Accordingly, we don’t trust it at all.”

The Adventure Society director was behind the table with the Knowledge Priest, Ebson Jillet, who tapped the two boxes behind the orb. The smaller box had previously contained the orb, while the larger one had contained the first box.

“If the orb explodes or does anything unexpected,” Jillet said, “this box will absorb and contain it. It can even draw in poison gas, explosive force or a variety of other magical threats.”

“Using the orb is very simple,” Musin explained.

“Is it?” Jason asked. “I don’t think you’ve got it the right way up.”

Musin rocked the orb back and forth with his finger.

“I don’t think there’s any way to tell. I don’t think there is a right way up.”

“If you say so,” Jason said, sceptical but not pushing the issue. Musin continued his explanation.

“A trickle of mana will let you control it intuitively, like most magic items. Once I send a signal through it that we’re ready to communicate, that will allow Jes Fin Kaal to open a communication channel. I would ask that you refrain from speaking out while the channel is open. The exception being Mr Asano whose participation was a requirement of ongoing negotiations. She will only speak to him going forward.”

“Because they’re probably working together,” one of the gold-rankers said. He was unknown to Jason, acting as security for the government officials. “This man Asano is as suspicious as the messengers. He’s been hiding from us and keeping secrets. It’s fairly obvious he’s working with them and I don’t know why we haven’t already peeled the secrets out of him, now that he’s left his hiding hole. He was just using his aura to make a drink for gods’ sakes. None of us can move things with our auras. Only messengers can do that.”

Jason let out a weary sigh.

“What’s your name?”

“Ikola Goeth.”

“Are you suggesting that I’m a messenger Ikola?” Jason asked lightly.

“Why not?” Ikola asked. “You’re an outworlder to my senses, but there was another outworlder in this city too. He turned out to be some magic snake egg planted by the messengers decades ago. There are still naga that came out of that thing hiding in the ruins of the city.”

“See, now that’s just frustrating,” Jason said. “The last guy who spoke up — I’m assuming he’s a mate of yours — got sucked up into a portal.”

Jason turned to Allayeth.

“Did you send him somewhere else, or just into a dimensional space?”

“Dimensional space,” she told him.

“That’s a little disappointing, I’m not going to lie. I thought you had a genuine offensive portal ability, like my mate Clive. Well, his is a teleport, but it’s pretty much the same.”

“Jason,” Allayeth said. “I think you may be getting distracted.”

“From what?”

“The man accusing you of having been planted by the messengers.”

“What? Oh, right. You should probably give him his friend back?”

A horizontal portal opened in the room and a gold-ranker fell out, bouncing comically on the floor. He was covered in welts visible through the shredded remains of his black clothing. As the man groaned feebly, Jason turned back to Ikola.

“Now,” Jason said, “I was just saying that you accusing me like this is frustrating because if I make a move to intimidate you into silence, it just makes your words seem true. Would I like to take a power sander to your face for accusing me of being on the side of the people who levelled the city and killed I don’t know how many people? Of course I would, that’s only natural. But that wouldn’t be productive. We’re all on the same side, and we need to reach an accommodation based on cooperation rather than—”

He paused as the injured gold ranker on the floor let out a loud groan of pain.

“—a pecking order based on the ability to perpetrate violence.”

Jason scowled at the fallen man.

“Bloke, you’re kind of undercutting me here. Get it together.”

Ikola got out of his chair and Jason did the same, the fallen man between them. The elven gold-ranker was half a head taller and dressed entirely in black. Jason was wearing a cream suit with a pink shirt from the collection tailored for him in Rimaros.

“Is nothing serious to you?” Ikola asked.

“You accused me of being a traitor,” Jason told him. “This meeting would get even more awkward if I took that seriously instead of in good humour.”

“You think you’re so special, don’t you?” the gold-ranker accused.

“Yep. And so do you, which I suspect is the real reason you’re so cranky. I’m going to sit back down and pretend you didn’t level the kind of accusation that gets people murdering one another. I’m hoping that you’ll also sit down, maybe engage in some self-reflection. Or at least just sit quietly. I understand that, as a gold-ranker, you aren’t used to being the guy standing at the back, but you’re here as a guard. In case you hadn’t noticed, there’s a who’s who of gold and diamond-rankers watching us squabble like children and it’s not doing any favours for either of our reputations.”

Ikola glanced left and right frowning in the unhappy realisation that Jason was right. He looked to be on the verge of stepping back but couldn't quite bring himself to let it go.

“You are a walking traitor flag and you get to attack someone, but I’m expected to sit down and keep my mouth shut?”

Jason opened his mouth to retort but stopped himself, letting out a sigh as his shoulders slumped.

“You’re right,” he said. “It’s not fair, and I’ve indulged in the kind of arrogant behaviour that not only have I done time and again, but I’ve criticised in others. So, how about I apologise to the guy on the ground for overreacting when he had a go at my friend, and you and I both step back and we let this meeting go forward?”

“Which neatly avoids the question of whether you’re a traitor when every indication is that you are.”

Jason looked at Ikola for a moment and then turned to the Adventure Society director.

“I tried,” Jason said. “De-escalation doesn’t come naturally to me, which I think everyone saw pretty clearly. But I tried, I really did. I don’t think we can move on to the next stage of this meeting with both him and me in the room, and I’m pretty sure you need me.”

The director did not look happy with Jason or Ikola, but it was Ikola he turned to.

“Mr Goeth, I must ask you to sit down and refrain from making further interruptions. If you feel that you are unable to do this, I must ask you to remove yourself instead.”

Ikola looked like he was going to argue but held his tongue. He helped the battered gold-ranker from the floor to his chair, frowning at the welts that should have already healed but remained bright red. He took his own seat with a dark glower and Musin turned his attention to Jason.

“And you, Mr Asano, I would advise you to be less provocative in how you act, as well as in how you react to others. I recognise that you have an outsized level of influence

relative to your rank and how you may feel the need to assert that influence when those of higher rank seek to suppress it. That being said, I think you will find that decorum will serve you better than acting out like a smug teenage aristocrat.”

The people in the room who knew Jason all winced, except for Arabelle. Jason didn't respond to the director and, instead, quietly retook his seat.

“Thank you, Mr Asano,” Musin said. “I will have you stand up again shortly once we activate the orb. As I was saying, prior to the interruption, once I signal that we are ready, the messengers will be able to open a channel for us to negotiate through. Jes Fin Kaal has made it clear that she will only negotiate with Mr Asano, whom I hope will take heed of my advice.”

Most of the room's occupants glanced in Jason's direction, but he showed no reaction to them or Musin's words.

“If there are no more interruptions,” Musin said, his tone indicating that it was not a question, “then we will begin.”

He reached out and touched a finger to the orb.

“It's done.”

The orb sat still on the table.

It continued sitting still on the table.

Emir surreptitiously checked his pocket watch and had his wrist slapped by his wife.

Jillet moved over to Musin and activated a small privacy screen in which they talked unheard by the room's other occupants, but watched by all. There was a minor visible component that blurred the area enough to prevent lip reading, but body language was still visible. Musin variously nodded, shrugged, shook his head and held out empty hands as he and Jillet spoke. Finally, Jillet deactivated the privacy screen.

“...yes, I'm sure it's on,” Musin finished, now audible to the room. His eyes darted back and forth and he slowly reached out to the orb as if that would somehow prevent everyone from noticing. His fingers brushed against it.

“It's definitely on,” he said to no one in particular. “I was sure it was, and it was.”

He was saved from the awkward moment by the orb which started emitting a soft glow.

“Right,” Musin said. “If you would stand in front of the orb please, Mr Asano?”

Jason got up and positioned himself in front of the table with a frown.

“This feels more like standing in front of a firing squad than I'm comfortable with,” he grumbled.

Musin reached out and touched the orb again. A hologram-like image of someone's head projected from the front of the sphere, slightly off-centre and tilted down. This gave Jason a view of the top of the head and one ear.

"What am I looking at?" the projection of Jes Fin Kaal asked. Musin quickly turned the orb so the projection rose from the top and the messenger's face became visible.

"It wasn't clear which way was up," Musin said. "You should consider marking them so people can tell."

"It doesn't matter," Jes Fin Kaal said, her gaze now locked on Jason. "So, you are their king."

"I'm no one's king, lady, and I refuse to believe you said that for any reason other than riling up the other people in this room against me."

She smiled.

"Not a complete idiot, then, which I appreciate. It was an open question, given the research we've done on you. I admit that I've been anticipating our meeting for some time."

"Personally, I wished you'd invaded with the next monster surge. Once I'm gold rank I could put you down myself instead of watching someone else do it."

"False machismo to make me think you're simple-minded enough to be led around by your own aggressive mindset? You can do better than that, Asano."

"I really can't. I actually am that simple-minded, so I talk about the films of Michael Dudikoff until people get distracted. People are starting to get wise to me, though: no one even asked me what a belt sander was."

Jason had never wondered what a snake would sound like if it laughed until he heard Jes Fin Kaal do it.

"I was told you would likely use irreverence and references to your home world in an attempt to disrupt my train of thought. You'll have to do better than that, Jason Asano."

"Alright. Two strongholds. That's the price."

"You want me to relinquish two more strongholds in return for your working with us?"

"No," Jason said. "You attacked us. You infested people with those parasites, which is a kind of horror even I have trouble imagining, and I've been through some stuff. You killed people, took their homes and everything that matters to them and now you're here to make a deal?"

"I don't think that you will let anger guide you. I'm sure you've been informed by now that the threat below your feet is greater than any presented by me. You need us."

“No, we don’t. With what you’ve done to this city, it’s better to pack everyone up, relocate and write the whole region off. It’s cheaper to contain the damage and rebuild elsewhere than clean up the mess you left behind.”

“I very much doubt the people in the room with you agree, Asano.”

“But you’re not talking to them. You made it very clear that you would only talk to me, so here are your options: One, you abandon—”

“This is a negotiation, Asano. I’m not here to listen to your ultimatums.”

“We aren’t negotiating yet, lady. I told you that two strongholds is the price, but I didn’t mean to get us working with you. That’s the price for me to even listen to what you want.”

“You think this tough-man act will work on me?”

“Nope. I doubt an axe to the head would work on you either, but if I get the chance, you’d better believe I’ll check. If you want me to listen to anything you say, empty two more of your strongholds and destroy them behind you.”

“It seems that I should have negotiated with the city officials after all.”

“Probably,” Jason agreed. “Feel free to do that. But if you’re sticking with me, you know the price. Don’t call back until it’s done.”

Jason slapped his hand on the orb and the projection disappeared. He turned to look at a room full of horrified faces.

“I thought that went pretty well,” he said.

Chapter 710

A Man of Principle

In a room full of shocked faces, Arabelle stood up and moved over to Jason, the bouncy floor making it slightly awkward.

"You're playing things dangerously, Jason," she told him. "But you did well."

The Adventure Society director's expression showed that he was not in agreement, but he was not one to explode into bluster.

"Mrs Remore, not to disagree with an expert in the study of the mind, but I would appreciate your thoughts on what makes Mr Asano's... bold negotiating strategy the correct path."

"I don't know how much you are aware of messenger upbringing, Director," she said, "but messengers are born fully grown and immediately put through comprehensive indoctrination. Even those who have escaped the behavioural programming of that indoctrination still exhibit certain behavioural traits that may be, in part, driven by inherent physiological factors. Natural instincts, if you will."

"And how is it that you are so familiar with the messengers?" asked the leader of the local government delegation.

He was a bureaucrat who had reached gold-rank through cores. This was his first time speaking up in the meeting, although declining to rein in his guard, Ikola, made a statement on its own. Arabelle turned to look at him, her expression ostensibly blank, yet somehow conveying the idea that she had found the man stuck to the bottom of her shoe.

"I didn't catch your name," she told him.

"Calcifer Bynes," the bureaucrat introduced himself. "Director of the Office of External Affairs. You seem to be more familiar with the messengers than the rest of us, Mrs Remore. I must confess a curiosity as to how that came about, given the violent reactions that messengers tend to have towards anyone who isn't one of their servants."

Arabelle smiled.

"Well, Mr Bynes—"

"Lord Bynes," he corrected. "Director Bynes is acceptable in certain contexts, where I am acting in my role as a representative of the city, although I would not recommend it. Addressing me as Lord Bynes at all times will save embarrassment for those who have trouble grasping the intricacies of proper etiquette."

"*Lord Bynes*," she corrected. "I'm afraid that some questions can only be answered through demonstration. I would be delighted to show you exactly how and where I've had

the opportunity to observe messengers, including examples of both having rejected indoctrination and remaining in its throes.”

Jason noticed the Knowledge Priest, Jillet, listening with particular interest. Jason opened the portal to his soul realm next to Arabelle.

“How do people keep opening portals in here?” Emir complained. “That guy who installed the dimensional suppression was worthless.”

“*You* installed the dimensional suppression,” Constance pointed out.

“I distinctly remember getting in a guy.”

“Yes. Then you kicked him out.”

“Why would I do that?”

“He invited me to dinner.”

“Oh. That makes sense.”

Arabelle spared her old teammate a wry glance before turning back to Bynes and gesturing to the portal invitingly.

“You can find the answers on the other side of that portal, Lord Bynes. I can only assume you are willing, if not eager to step through. Surely a man so unsubtle in how he throws around implications is only doing so that he might have the opportunity to investigate their accuracy. You wouldn’t go implying that I am an unintelligent traitor only to not just imply but outright prove yourself both a hypocrite and a coward, would you? Please step through the portal.”

“Mrs Remore,” Allayeth said. “I am afraid that Lord... Bynes, was it? Lord Bynes does not have the level of refinement in his perceptual abilities that one might expect from someone of his rank. It is only natural that in his role as an administrator, he does not have the time for the kind of training that even most core users would manage. This is only to be expected, as why would he waste time with such exercises when he never encounters any monsters? Even during the monster surge, his aptitude as an organiser makes him far too useful to be on the front lines. After all, what is the value of just another gold-ranker, with a startling level of under-preparedness to face any monster, compared to a logistician of what I assume must be great capability.”

Arabelle smiled as Bynes schooled his emotions enough that his lips pressing together hard was the only indication of his rage. Whatever the truth of Allayeth’s claims about the man’s perception abilities, Jason recognised that the man was skilled at keeping his emotions out of his aura.

"I believe I understand, Lady Allayeth," Arabelle said. "You're saying that Lord Bynes is ill-equipped to understand what he will be walking into through that portal until he sees it for himself."

"I am," Allayeth said. "While I am confident that Lord Bynes has a dazzling expertise in his chosen field of administration, that expertise understandably falls short on issues relating to adventurers and their activities. I'm certain that any implications he may have inadvertently made against a celebrated adventurer who has braved danger time and time again were entirely by accident. As such, I have no doubt that he would be more than happy to *quite explicitly* retract them. Of course, I may be incorrect and Lord Bynes was entirely deliberate in how he chose his words."

Allayeth's friendly smile plunged into Jason's mind, found the most primal fear response he had and triggered it.

"If Lord Bynes was deliberate in his implications," Allayeth continued, "he would surely be happy to put his principles to the test. He would most certainly step through that portal, even not knowing what lies beyond. To do anything less would be to show himself a craven and insincere politician who mouths principles and exploits baseless accusations with neither the intention nor ability to interrogate their veracity."

The administrator sat silently in his seat, jaw locked. If it was only Arabelle, a fellow gold-ranker and outsider to Yareh, he would have been able to shoot back. The woman was a century too early if she thought she was his equal in slinging mud. A diamond-ranker who was also a native was another prospect entirely.

In politics, if a diamond-ranker said the sky was green, then all you could do was nod and agree. For all you knew, they could turn it green to prove you wrong if you had the lack of sense to disagree. Allayeth talking to him this way was the political equivalent of sucking his guard through a portal; a blunt message that she could. From pretending she didn't remember his name to delivering an unpalatable ultimatum, she had used the power of a diamond-ranker to force him into a corner.

The options in front of Bynes were unpalatable. One was to apologise to the Remore woman, undercutting his prestige. There were enough people in the room that word would spread and his political influence would take a hit, requiring time to claw back. For some reason, neither of them seemed to believe he would be willing to go through the portal, which left him wondering why.

The portal had appeared next to the Remore woman, with no visible indication of who called it up. His magical senses told him that it belonged to Asano, who had clearly won over the diamond-ranker somehow. Allayeth's jibes about his perception being not entirely

without basis, there was little Bynes was able to glean from the portal. It radiated Asano's aura, which is how he identified its creator. The only other thing Bynes could sense was a power on the far side of the portal, he couldn't identify it. It was much stronger than Asano, but Asano's aura infused the portal, masking the nature and owner of whatever lay on the other side.

There was no doubt Asano was an anomaly, given his aura at silver-rank. The general consensus was that he had one, and probably more, extremely powerful backers all using him as a proxy. Bynes was not stupid enough to accept the outlandish exaggerations coming from his contacts in Rimaros. Havi Estos, who had been the information broker Bynes had always gone to first, had made such absurd claims that Bynes was now looking for a new primary contact.

Bynes stood up. He might not be willing to face off against monsters, and why should he? He didn't have the training or the experience. His battlefields were offices, salons and ballrooms; his weapons were information and innuendo. Just because he wouldn't take up a sword did not mean he was a coward. He was clearly expected to back off, so the way to fight back was to take the option they didn't think that he would.

Bynes was clued into political events enough to know that the diamond-rankers had been seeking out whatever was on the other side of that portal. Allayeth's colleague, Charist, detested politics and administration. Bynes had always been happy to help him out, taking on any and all tedious tasks and requests that Charist wished to avoid. It was more than worth the effort with the loose-lipped diamond-ranker being an information gold mine.

Bynes had no idea why the diamond-rankers had been unable to enter Asano's portal. The Remore woman had as much as admitted to having spent time wherever it led to. If Bynes could deliver to Charist the secrets he had been unable to get himself, he could even be a shield against Allayeth, who was clearly biased against him.

The two diamond-rankers had a long record of working well together, their very different styles making for complementary approaches. Bynes was fully aware that such a relationship between very different people was a delicate thing. If he was clever and careful, he might be able to pit them against one another, allowing him to profit. And with the entire city to be rebuilt, there was plenty of profit to be had for a man whose eyes were not blinded by worthless compassion.

"I am a man of principle," Bynes lied. "I want to see for myself where you have been consorting with messengers, Mrs Remore."

Arabelle's eyebrows went up in surprise and Allayeth had a delighted grin that Bynes tried not to let worry him.

"You're going through," Allayeth said. "I'm surprised, Lord Bynes; good for you. I'm extremely fascinated about what happens to... about what you see in there."

As for Jason Asano, he was rubbing his temples like he had a headache.

"Do we have to do this now?" he asked. "I thought I was bad for derailing meetings, but you've all taken this one off the rails and crashed it into a school. For puppies."

"Regrets, Asano?" Bynes asked in a mocking tone.

"Look," Jason said. "I'm just saying that maybe we get this meeting back on track and we play who's brave enough to go through the mysterious portal later."

"No," Bynes insisted. "My character has been impugned. We must settle this now."

Jason frowned in confusion.

"So, what you're saying is, your reputation is more important than the cataclysmic event that threatens to destroy the entire city?"

"Of course not."

"Then, let's get back to the meeting."

"And leave my good name flapping in the breeze like a soiled flag?"

"Okay," Jason told him. "It doesn't sound like what I'm saying is getting through."

He held up his hands as if comparing the weight of two invisible objects.

"On one hand, we've got the city blowing up and the whole region being drowned in fire and ash. On the other, we have people thinking that you're bit of a prick. Which of those do you think is in more urgent need of address?"

"The disaster is months away, and we can resolve the issue of my reputation today. Would you string my reputation out to be dragged through the mud until the city is saved?"

"Wow," Jason said. "Was not expecting you to lean in your reputation priority over stopping a volcano from wiping out hundreds of thousands of people."

"You seem adamant about not allowing me through that portal, Asano. Do you have something to hide?"

"Uh, no. I'd like to you know, clean up a bit. I wasn't expecting guests. And also," he said, wheeling on Arabelle and Allayeth, "I never actually volunteered to participate in this. You two said he should go through the portal and you never even asked. Which is rude."

"You opened up the portal on cue," Arabelle pointed out. "Don't go complaining that you weren't completely complicit in what happens to Lord Bynes."

Jason let out a groan.

“Fine,” he said resignedly, gesturing at the portal. “Go for it. If you have to. Which you don’t.”

“Lord Bynes,” Ikola said. “I strongly advise against going through a portal to an uncertain destination. It was opened by a silver-ranker and can still accommodate you. That suggests a power behind it that is far greater than Asano, and one we know nothing about.”

“Then it is time whoever is behind Asano is dragged out of the shadows,” Bynes said. He threw Jason a disdainful glare, marched over to the portal and went through. Jason turned to Arabelle and Allayeth.

“I don’t know why you wanted him in there, but you were too enthusiastic about it. He probably would have backed out if he didn’t think I was trying to avoid his digging up my secrets.”

“Is he going to dig up your secrets?” Allayeth asked.

“Probably. Anyway, now he’s gone, we should get back to the meeting, yeah?”

They looked around the room whose occupants were divided into two groups. The ones who knew Jason all wore long-suffering expressions. The rest looked like they had no idea what was happening, but there was a diamond-ranker acting strangely which was a very good reason to be almost anywhere else.

“Regardless of what Lord Bynes is doing,” the Adventure Society direct said, “Mr Asano is correct in that the matter at hand is the impending disaster. For that reason, I would like to return to the topic of why Mr Asano’s approach to negotiation was the correct one. It was highly aggressive.”

“That was necessary,” Arabelle said. “As I was saying, prior to the interruption of Lord Bynes, messengers, like all living creatures, have natural instincts. For the messengers, their natural instinct is to respect strength and disregard weakness. It’s a predatory instinct that divides everything into threat or prey. Obviously, messengers have higher mental functions that let them move beyond base instinct, but we are all driven by our instincts far more than we realise.”

“You are saying that a more conciliatory approach would have hurt us,” the director said.

“Yes,” Arabelle said with a firm nod. “If Jason was anything but unyielding, Jes Fin Kaal would have lost any respect for him. She may have become much harder to negotiate with or potentially stopped negotiating entirely.”

“But that does not change the fact that we are negotiating from a position of weakness,” the director said. “We have already stated that we will not give up this land. I understand the value of bluffing, Mr Asano, but if they call that bluff, we will fold.”

“It’s not a bluff,” Jason said. “The messenger wants something. From me. And I’m not giving whatever it is to her under whatever circumstances she wants because you refuse to relocate. I won’t fold because you won’t move. I’m prepared to walk away, at which point you can negotiate with her yourself.”

Jason and the director stared at each other for a long time.

“This is not your home,” the director said. “I can’t ask you to throw yourself into the monster’s lair for us.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about Jason,” Arabelle told him. “I’ve been working with him for years, now, and what never changes is that he’ll always throw himself into the monster’s lair. However much he might whine and complain about it.”

“Also, he wasn’t just aggressive in that negotiation,” Emir chimed in. “I’m not the only one who felt that was a little flirty, right?”

“Oh, he’s always like that,” Neil called out from the back. “You should see him with Clive’s wife.”

Bynes came bursting through the portal and sprinted across the room in a mad panic, stumbling on the bouncy floor. He scrambled out through the door and sprinted down the hall outside in a gold-rank blur of speed.

Chapter 711

Experiment

Jason went to the door of the meeting room and looked out but Lord Bynes was already gone. Being a monster core user didn't hurt his gold-rank speed and he had shot out like a rocket.

"Does he even know the way out? There was an elevating platform. It would feel weird to pause in the middle of a panicked flight to stop, calmly ride an elevator down and then bolt off in a mad dash again."

"He skipped the elevating platform," Emir said. Like Jason, he could sense the people in his cloud house. "He went out through a window."

Jason turned around to face Allayeth and Arabelle.

"Look," he said. "I played along, but can someone explain to me why we just ran that guy over the coals?"

"What did you do to him exactly?" Arabelle asked. "I've seen a lot of different kinds of fear — a lot — but what was coming off that man's aura was new to me."

"I've seen it," Allayeth said. "I've even felt it, but not like Lord Bynes. I'm finding my curiosity as to what lays beyond that portal of yours freshly aroused."

"Do try to control yourself," Jason told her. "You shouldn't let your curiosity be aroused in front of all these people."

"You say that," Allayeth told him, "yet you keep arousing it over and over."

"I'm not going out of my way to be arousing."

"I'm not sure I entirely believe that," Allayeth said. "There's only so arousing a person can be by accident, and given the frequency with which you are being arousing, I can only assume it is on purpose."

"I need you both to stop saying 'arouse,'" Arabelle told them.

"I think we all might need that," Clive added.

"Especially while he's standing next to my mother," Rufus said.

"I told you he was like that," Neil muttered.

"I wish I was like that," Travis mumbled, glancing at Gabrielle. She, in turn, was glaring at Jason.

"See," she said to her fellow priests and priestesses. "What did I tell you? Moral turpitude."

"I thought turpitude was a thing you used to clean boats," Taika said.

“It depends on the boat,” Jason told him. “I will admit, though, it does mostly make them dirtier.”

The Adventure Society director looked on in a combination of confusion and horror as the diamond-ranker making innuendos became the latest way the meeting went off the rails.

“I think,” he declared loudly, “that it is time to call this meeting to an end. I will discuss aspects of what is happening with the various interested parties in smaller group sessions. I will reconvene this meeting when it is appropriate or we see any kind of response from Jes Fin Kaal.”

The meeting broke up in short order. Rick Geller frowned as he watched Jason leaving with Arabelle and Allayeth, and got a slap on the back of his head from his girlfriend, Hannah.

“What was that for?” Rick asked, turning on her.

“I don’t know,” Hannah said. “But I’m pretty sure you deserved it.”

Rick glanced back at Jason, the gold-ranker and the diamond-ranker as they disappeared through the door.

“Yeah, probably,” he admitted in a resigned voice.

“Jason,” Arabelle said as they walked through the halls of Emir’s cloud palace. “What exactly did you show that man?”

“I’m curious as well,” Allayeth agreed.

“You said you’d felt that kind of fear yourself,” Jason said. “Where did you encounter something like that?”

“Every diamond-ranker has,” Allayeth said. “You’re silver-rank now, and soon you’ll begin to realise that once you approach the limits of silver-rank, you can’t just advance the way you have, training and pushing yourself. Monster core users can push through to gold, but that rather dead-ends them.”

“He’s not ready for that yet,” Arabelle pointed out. “Not quite.”

“That’s fine,” Allayeth said. “What we’re talking about is the transition from gold to diamond-rank, anyway. As you grow closer to the pinnacle of gold, you start to get an instinctive sense of something that lies beyond. Not diamond-rank itself, but what lies beyond that.”

“Transcendence,” Jason said.

“Yes. Do you know much about transcendence?”

“Oh, you pick up things here and there. The first magic item I ever got was transcendent rank, now that I think about it.”

Allayeth turned to him, wide-eyed.

“You’ve seen a transcendent rank item?”

“I’ve used a few,” he said casually as they stepped onto an elevating platform. “I kind of go through them, now that I think about it. It might be one of my things.”

“More than one?” Allayeth said faintly. “What did they do?”

“The first one brought me back from the dead the...”

His brow creased in thought.

“...I want to say the second time? Yeah, the second time. Took me back to my world while it was at it.”

“To the other universe.”

“Yep. That one was a consumable, so it was only ever meant to be a one-and-done. I had this magic door for rewriting reality and—”

“Rewriting reality?”

“I know, right? Thankfully, I’d just hit silver-rank; I’d have Buckley’s chance of remaking chunks of the planet at bronze-rank. Anyway, the Builder left this door so some muppet would come along — in this case, me — and fix reality after it had been left a bit janky by the last bloke with his job. The magic door would let the Builder worm his way into them, though, except that the Builder already tried that and I was having none of it. I wiped off the Builder’s control, gave myself the old five-finger discount and ninja’d the door for myself. Later on, the World-Phoenix gave me this dimensional bridge thing, but I accidentally smashed that one and the Builder’s door. I gave the old soul a bit of what-for and both items got broken down for parts.”

Allayeth looked at Arabelle who gave her a sympathetic shake of the head.

“Jason occasionally likes to push the limits of his translation power,” Arabelle told her. “I’ll translate later. For now, you were talking about transcendence.”

“Uh, yes,” Allayeth said, regaining her composure. “As I was saying, those of us who approach the peak of gold-rank start to get a sense of what lies at the end of the path. A state of being that no amount of advancement can achieve. A state that can only be sought out once every drop of mortal potential has been wrung out. The pinnacle does not lead to the next journey, but gives you the barest of qualifications to begin looking for where the next journey begins.”

“Moving beyond diamond-rank,” Arabelle said. “It is possible, then?”

“No,” Allayeth said. “And that is rather the point. To transcend, you have to go beyond not just the limits of mortality, but the limits of possibility. The glimpses of the wider cosmos you gain as you approach diamond-rank are soul-crushing. You don’t just learn how insignificant you are intellectually, but you truly understand. You comprehend it in its complete and utterly stark fullness, right down into the depths of your soul.”

“And that breaks people,” Jason said.

“It can,” Allayeth agreed. “For those who believe themselves important — and what gold-ranker doesn’t — it can, indeed, break them. We are specks of sand on a beach that goes on forever, lasting only an instant before blowing away on the wind. The very world we stand on exists only for a fleeting moment in an insignificant corner of infinity.”

The platform reached the bottom floor and they continued through Emir’s massive cloud palace. There was a bustle of activity as people came through to be tested for world-taker worms and processed for housing and food allocation. The mass of people instinctively moved around them without even realising they were doing it. Jason observed Allayeth’s aura manipulation producing the effect and took mental notes.

“The revelation of the cosmos and our place in it is too much for some, and they break. For others, it is a comfort to be a part of such grandness. It places the petty squabbles we all fight into perspective, revealing that they are, ultimately, meaningless.”

“I disagree, but go on,” Jason said.

“There are those for whom having the cosmos revealed does nothing. It has no effect at all. They are at one with themselves, who they are, and who they are not. Seeing their place in all things fails to change that. For those who are already in this state, moving from gold to diamond proves a relatively easy transition. For the rest of us, we have to try and reach that state. It doesn’t have to be forever, but we need to find that equanimity for at least a time in order to move beyond gold-rank.”

“And you did that,” Arabelle said. “As a scholar of the mind, I respect your ability to achieve that.”

“I spent years in isolation. Sometimes wandering the world, other times in uninhabited places, meditating for weeks or even months. Eventually, I found a peace through which I was able to surpass my previous limits. I’m not sure I could find that again if I tried. I know that fear. That dread that reaches into the core of you. It takes who you think you are and makes you realise that you’re infinitesimally smaller.”

She looked at Jason.

“What I want to know,” she asked, “is why I felt that same fear from Lord Bynes. He may be a gold-ranker, but he’s not even close to the peak. Even if he were, he wouldn’t

sense what I described. A core user that does is the extreme exception, usually master craftspeople. Bynes is very far from that, so how did you show him the entirety of the cosmos?”

Jason didn't answer immediately as they had reached the entrance to the cloud palace, moving through the waves of people. Going outside, Jason's aura shucked off the heavy rain as they walked on a path of stone slabs set into the mud.

“You know your friend Charist is listening to us,” Jason told Allayeth. “I'm not going to go giving up my secrets for free. I want information in return.”

“What do you want?” she asked, her voice sober.

“You have to tell me everything about the sauce that was in that sandwich.”

Arabelle slapped a hand over her face and Allayeth's eyebrows moved upwards.

“And I mean everything,” Jason said. “Where you got it, what it's made of, what is the process. Are there variants? How are the ingredients cultivated? In what conditions? Who made it? Did they grow the ingredients themselves? How is it stored? Is there a difference when—”

“I'm serious,” Allayeth said. “This isn't just about finding out something for a political purpose, here. We're talking about the fundamental mechanics of essence user advancement...”

Allayeth trailed off as Jason did something with his aura. The air around them shivered and the two women felt something lock into place.

“What is this?” Allayeth asked. “This isn't something you can do with a normal aura. This feels like a messenger technique.”

“It has elements of the way messengers use their auras,” Jason said. “It's something I've been working on. Essentially, it's an aura-based privacy screen. I based it on a lot of elements. Messenger techniques, certainly, but also examining how mine and Emir's cloud palaces obscure external senses. Plus, how gods secure their holy spaces. The inviolable places at the core of their temples.”

“How would you even understand how the gods do that?” Allayeth asked.

“I know you've felt it,” Jason told her. “You and your friend violated my home, pushing your way into the places your senses wouldn't penetrate. As much as I appreciate a good spicy sauce — and it's a lot — I haven't forgotten what you did. Now, can your senses penetrate this privacy screen without me noticing? I know you could smash through it, but can you weasel your way in?”

Jason felt a tingle on his aura senses.

“Maybe,” she said. “Not quickly, at least until I examine the technique you’re using some more.”

“Then I want your word that anything you manipulate me into giving up stays with you.”

“If I’m manipulating it out of you, why would you trust my word?”

“Call it an experiment. I like making friends and I don’t care for having allies. I like you, Allayeth, but my judgement isn’t always the best.”

Arabelle made a coughing sound. Jason gave her a flat look but she maintained an innocent expression, saying nothing.

“Friendship requires the extension of trust,” Jason continued. “I’m going to extend a little trust to you, Allayeth, and see where it takes us.”

“You’re an odd man, Jason,” Allayeth told him. “You dance around a point until the other person passes out from exhaustion, or you dive on it like a shark on an unfortunate sailor.”

Jason gave her a thin-lipped smile.

“There’s a gate,” he told her. “Through the portal. It connects what’s on the other side of the portal to the wider cosmos. I used that to show Bynes what you described peak gold-rankers seeing.”

“You showed him.”

“Yes.”

“You never left that room while he was inside that portal. And he was not in there for long.”

“Both of those things are true.”

She narrowed her eyes, peering at him.

“You have at least some measure of control on the far side of that portal.”

He didn’t respond, or even look at her as they walked along the path of muddy stone slabs.

“Who possesses the power I’m feeling through that portal?” Allayeth asked, more aloud to herself than in any expectation of an answer. “It’s not just some natural force you’re tapping into. There’s a will behind it. I can almost feel it, but your aura on the portal is masking anything I can identify. Why has the entity behind that power given you so much control over it? Why do they trust you?”

“The owner of that power doesn’t trust me,” Jason said, drawing a sharp look from Arabelle that Allayeth didn’t miss. Then he grinned.

“And that’s as much as you’re getting. It’s time you tell me why you have it out for Bynes.”

Chapter 712

Spanked

“Gormanston Bynes,” Allayeth explained, “is one of the most prominent members of a powerful political faction here in Yareh. It was his son, Calcifer, that you sent running off in a panic, but the father is the true threat.”

She was still walking from Emir’s cloud palace towards Jason’s with Jason himself and Arabelle Remore. They were keeping a leisurely pace while others hustled around them under magic umbrellas, regular umbrellas or a pointed longing for umbrellas. Jason’s aura was pushing aside any rain before it reached him or his companions.

“I first came across Bynes when I was working with the original refugee camp,” Arabelle said. “This was before the attack when we were scrambling to get any survivors out of the towns and into the city while keeping any world-taker worms out of the city. You remember the scramble to get supplies coming in and the logistics in place to do that efficiently.”

“I do,” Jason said. His cloud building had been the original screening centre before it was eventually moved to Emir’s.

“Bynes was pushing to get the funding for that cut. He was riling people up about the messenger threat, saying that funding should go to fighting the messengers.”

“Bynes and his faction are extremely focused on consolidating and expanding aristocratic power,” Allayeth explained. “They are also aggressively lacking in scruples regarding how their agenda is met.”

“Which usually means they’d be happy to feed puppies into a wood chipper,” Jason said.

“Can I assume that a wood chipper is a device for turning large pieces of wood into very small pieces of wood?” Allayeth asked.

“You can.”

“And I assume that placing small, adorable animals into such a device would remove a considerable amount of their innocent charm.”

“I would characterise that as accurate, yes,” Jason said.

“The main point,” Arabelle said, “being that they are willing to stoop to significant lows.”

“Like taking money from the refugee efforts,” Jason said. “Why would he make a move like that? It can’t make him popular.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised,” Allayeth said. “There are two things you need to know to understand Bynes. One is his political faction, and the other is that political faction’s agenda. The short version is that they are a cabal of merchant barons and old-money aristocrats. What they want is the ever-original money and power.”

“What makes them interesting,” Arabelle said, “is that while they do have combat-oriented people, they largely eschew the traditional power structure of personal power. Look at Ikola, a trained ex-adventurer, taking orders from Calcifer Bynes, a core user who’s never faced a monster in his life. The one he’s really serving is the father, not the son.”

“For the long version, let me start with context,” Allayeth said. “In any major population centre, political power is balanced between three forces. One power is the civilian government, be that a royal court or, in the case of most city-states, a ducal administration. It also frequently includes guilds and associations outside of the Adventure and Magic Societies, along with the noble houses and any other families of influence. Arabelle’s Remore family is a good example.”

“Strictly speaking, I married into it,” Arabelle said. “It’s how I manage to go five minutes without telling people my family runs a school.”

Jason snorted a laugh.

“The two societies, adventure and magic, make up another of the three major pillars of any city or country,” Allayeth continued. “The third force is the collective churches.”

“I’m going to go with the much lengthier explanation of the first force,” Jason said, “and guess that local government is the problem here.”

“Yes,” Allayeth said. “The problem is one of balance. When the three forces are in balance, things work more or less as they should. Corruption disturbs that balance, having various knock-on effects.”

“I’ve seen that before,” Jason said. The politics of Greenstone had a lot of rot, and Jason had seen dire consequences before that rot started being excised. From the exploitation of Sophie to Jason’s kidnapping to the disastrous expedition during which Farrah and many other adventurers died.

“In Yaresh,” Allayeth continued, “the civic administration is considerably weaker than the other two. This is almost entirely due to internal strife. Every one of the three groups has internal conflicts as they jostle for power, but a particular group amongst the city authorities has become a problem.”

“A bunch of rich pricks making trouble,” Jason said.

“Yes,” Allayeth said. “In this particular case, it is a collection of mostly aristocrats with exceptional wealth, along with a few merchant barons. They are known as the Aristocratic Faction. They own most of the land in the region and provide most of the jobs. They use that power and influence to co-opt their tenants and workers into certain ideologies. They take ideas that are easy to sell to large groups that the aristocrats themselves make sure are poorly educated. I’m talking about the usual tribalist and exclusionary ideologies, which they weld to other ideologies that help the aristocrats. Playing on simplistic ideals and commonly held prejudices, they’ve built a power base of loud and angry people who rabidly support their policies. The very policies that keep them poor and ignorant.”

“I’ve seen that before,” Jason said. “A lot of countries in my world have suffered through that. My own included.”

“What I just described is unpleasant,” Allayeth said, “but not, in and of itself, crippling. The problem is that the aristocratic faction has done something extremely unusual in that they have focused on power structures completely divorced from personal power. No adventurers, no magical researchers. Just money and political influence.”

“But political influence in Pallimustus is always tied to personal power,” Jason pointed out. “Royal families get stuffed full of monster cores so they can ostensibly stand at the top of society.”

“But that is not hard and fast,” Arabelle said. “Look at the Sapphire Crown Guild in Rimaros. They have more personal power than the royal family, but they’ve been instilled with an idea of duty.”

“Yeah,” Jason said, “but Rimaros is an exception. They put their people through the hard yards. You think Zara is some monster-core-eating waif?”

“Not the best example,” Arabelle acknowledged. “I already mentioned Ikola and how he was subordinate to Calcifer Bynes, despite being more personally powerful.”

“It’s part of an attitude the Aristocratic Faction promotes,” Allayeth said. “They are trying to normalise their strengths of money and influence as being more important than personal power. The problem is, they’re willing to undermine the structure they belong to. They undercut the city authorities, flatly lie about how and why they did it and use popular support to prevent any backlash. They blame everyone else while positioning themselves as the only solutions to the problems they themselves caused.”

“Why?” Jason asked. “What’s their end game?”

“The bureaucracy,” Allayeth said. “Each of the three groups brings their own strengths to the table, be it magic and monster hunting or communion with the gods. For civic administrations, it is the ability to run cities and countries. The day-to-day logistics of

managing tens or hundreds of thousands, even millions, is breathtakingly complex. Once that complexity reaches a point where very few people understand it but a city or kingdom absolutely relies on it, you've created nexus points of extreme power. Power that most don't even see until it gets exercised in ways they don't like."

"I see," Jason said. "They're riling up the population, using that to enact policies and force through appointments to put their own people in the nodes of bureaucratic power."

"Yes," Allayeth confirmed. "Everything from department heads like Bynes through to magistrates. Now, with the city fallen, you would expect them to back off. To let things rebuild before they resume their ambitions for control. Instead, they are using it as leverage. Their merchant barons are taking control of the private elements of the reconstruction; building firms, supply importers and the like. Their bureaucrats are taking control of the public elements. Regulations, seizures of private goods and resources in the name of the public good. And, of course, their people end up in charge of those resources."

"They are setting themselves up so that, when Yaresh is rebuilt," Arabelle explained, "they are in control of it."

"And that's why Bynes worked his way into that meeting?" Jason asked. "Because knowing, maybe even influencing whether Yaresh is rebuilt here or elsewhere is critical to their plans."

"More than that," Arabelle said. "If Yaresh gets saved from a fresh new disaster, the people behind that will have influence."

"You already do, Jason," Allayeth explained. "Your actions during the Battle of Yaresh, along with your conflicts with myself and Charist, have made your name known. The mysteries surrounding you only make you more interesting. I'm now convinced that Charist was manipulated into pushing you so that you would be undermined. The Aristocratic faction is a strong supporter of Charist, despite his ideologies being entirely centred around personal power hierarchies."

"How does that work?" Arabelle asked.

"Charist dislikes many of the responsibilities that come with his level of power," Allayeth explained. "When diamond rankers like myself or your father-in-law, Arabelle, settle permanently in a city, we take on certain responsibilities. The simple presence of our power has a ripple effect that goes unnoticed by the general population, but those in power are very aware of it. I suspect that you have some experience with this yourself, Jason."

"Unfortunately," Jason said.

“The Aristocratic Faction do a good job of relieving Charist of annoying tasks that he would otherwise have to deal with. People seeking him out for favours or knowledge. He lets the Aristocratic faction insulate him from that.”

“Will Charist act on their behalf?” Jason asked.

“Not directly,” Allayeth said with absolute assurance. “Charist is extremely enamoured of personal power hierarchies. He sees what they do for him as natural deference to his rank and would never grant them a favour for it, if only to avoid setting a precedent. But through their services to him, they’re able to filter the information he gets. I’ve been trying to get Charist more personally engaged in events, but to little success.”

“So that the way this faction painted me, Charist saw me as a threat to the city.”

“Yes,” Allayeth said. “Only when Charist’s approach was rebuffed effectively did he leave handling you to me. The Aristocratic Faction, however, did not give up so easily.”

“Bynes tried to paint me as a traitor and it backfired,” Arabelle said. “Bynes’ lackey, Ikola, tried the same thing on you, Jason. They were there specifically to sow doubt and diminish our influence.”

“What we did to Bynes will make him a laughing stock,” Allayeth said, “but it’s only one hit in a long and complex fight against the Aristocratic Faction. A good hit, but far from a finishing blow. We need to curtail their power and then do something about the Magic Society’s corruption. If we can manage both of those, Yaresh has a good chance of coming through this with a functioning political system that will actually help rebuild it. But, as the Magic Society and Bynes are demonstrating, times of crisis are strong opportunities for those willing to exploit them at the cost of everyone else.”

“You keep saying ‘we,’” Jason said. “I hope you don’t mean we three.”

“No, I mean those of us that fight for the soul of Yaresh,” Allayeth said, then sighed. “It is a challenge that seems increasingly insurmountable.”

Jason let out a sigh of his own.

“I’m not great at intervening in political situations, as it turns out,” he said. “I’m pretty good at reading them, though. And what I’m getting from this is that it’s an internecine rat’s nest that I can only make worse by sticking my big dumb head into the middle of. But you two just went and stuck it in for me.”

“You didn’t have to let him into that portal,” Allayeth said.

“Don’t give me that,” Jason said. “Arabelle knew I’d do that the moment she suggested it. And you knew it too.”

Allayeth glanced at Arabelle.

“What makes you think she was so confident?”

“Because she knows me,” he said, then also turned his gaze on Arabelle. “Don’t you, Mrs Remore? Why don’t you tell her why I did it?”

“Because I wanted you to,” Arabelle said. “I shouldn’t have done that. You’re right; involving you in the ground-level politics was a mistake. Given who and what you are, the circles you travel in, we should be treating you more like a diamond-ranker. Unless you know the local situation as well as Allayeth, here, you shouldn’t be involved.”

“Honestly,” Jason said, “it’s actually kind of great to see you make a mistake. You’ve always been this sage-like figure, talking me through every dumb thing I’ve ever done. It’s nice to see that you can stuff up, too.”

“I guess I shouldn’t apologise, then,” Arabelle said.

“No, you should definitely apologise. I’m caught up in this Bynes nonsense, now. His people will probably come after me.”

“I think they may not,” Allayeth said. “The Bynes family is not a loyal breed. Depending on how much his humiliation hits the father’s reputation, he may cut the son out and move on. Not from the family, but you can expect Calcifer to become society wallpaper, seen and not heard. I think it’s more likely that the Aristocratic Faction leave you be. They know you’re not a soft target, now, and you have too many mysteries. One of them just bit back, and smart political players don’t pit themselves against the unknown if it poses any real threat. Not unless they have to. They probed and got bitten for their trouble. They’re more likely to leave you be than risk making you an enemy.”

“Well, that sounds nice,” Jason said. “I just don’t know if I have the kind of luck where the bad guys have a go, get spanked and then cut their losses.”

Chapter 713

Better Ambitions

In the empty void of a dying universe, one lush green and blue planet remained. Shielded from entropy by magic older than the ancient universe itself, some of the Builder's most powerful agents prepared to move it to a fresh, young reality. In a dimension ship, floating far enough from the planet to not fall into its orbit, a collection of prime avatars were watching. Each avatar belonged to a different member of the Council of Kings, the closest thing the messengers had to central leadership.

What the avatars were watching was an army of the Builder's most powerful tools, the massive golems called world engineers, orbiting the planet. The avatars observed as the world engineers wrapped the planet in threads of intrinsic-mandate magic, like a spider wrapping up captured prey.

Along with the avatars, the observation room of the dimensional ship contained Erigo Fin Desca, the Builder's new prime vessel. After Shako was taken by the Sundered Throne, the Builder had finally chosen his replacement. Erigo had originally been a messenger and still looked like one, but with heavy modification by the Builder. His wings were gleaming silver metal and his skin looked and felt like cold alabaster. His eyes were orbs of amber glass and his hair was entirely absent. His toga-like clothes had no fabric, being made entirely of tiny, interlocked shards of metal. With hues ranging from coppery reds to ocean blue sapphire, they sparkled in glimmering waves of colour.

One of the astral king avatars was not watching the planet through the transparent wall of the observation deck of the spaceship-like dimensional vessel. Instead, he was looking over Erigo's clothes. This was the avatar of the astral king Jamis Fran Muskar, and he stood out from the other avatars, even compared to Erigo. Jamis was the only avatar whose wings had been completely absorbed into his body, making him look like a seven-foot-tall celestine with dark copper hair and eyes. Messengers, astral kings included, rarely hid their wings. He was also the only person in the room standing on the floor instead of floating over it. He wore shoes where the others had sandals or bare feet. Instead of diaphanous robes or draping togas, he wore fitted clothes in sober colours.

"How do you prevent pinching and chafing?" Jamis asked Erigo, still peering at his clothes. "Do you use magic, or perhaps some manner of conventional lubricant? So many of my fellows overlook the sensory pleasures once they become astral kings, but oiling oneself up is a delightful indulgence. All the better if someone does it for you."

“There are more important matters at hand than self-indulgence and the clothing choices of the Builder’s new vessel,” a woman told him. She was the prime avatar of Vesta Carmis Zell, the astral king whom Jes Fin Kaal served. Jamis turned to look at her, saying nothing. She held his gaze for only a moment before lowering her eyes. Jamis smiled slightly, then turned his attention to the planet outside.

“When this task is complete,” Jamis said, “the price is paid. Zithis Carrow Vayel will have fulfilled his debt to us.”

“His name is the Builder,” Erigo corrected. “He is not one of our kind anymore.”

“Our kind?” Jamis asked. “Do you consider yourself a messenger still, Erigo Fin Desca?”

“I am more a messenger than you, Jamis Fran Muskar. The astral kings are no longer messengers.”

Jamis tilted his head, examining Erigo as if he was a painting.

“You are part of the Unorthodoxy,” Jamis surmised. “Or you were, perhaps, prior to assuming your current position.”

“I was,” Erigo admitted. “I have moved on. There is little point fighting an oppressor that can turn you into a mindless drone and send you to fight your own allies.”

“We should destroy you, traitor,” one of the other astral kings said.

“Oh, don’t bother with our little friend, here,” Jamis told him.

“He thinks because he serves the Builder now that he—”

Jamis cut the astral king off, turning to look at the man.

“I said don’t bother with our little friend, here.”

Jamis raised an eyebrow to question if the astral king was done talking. The man stayed silent and bowed his head slightly, earning a friendly smile from Jamis.

“See?” Jamis asked the others. “We’re all friends, here. Erigo Fin Desca has told us himself that he has left the Unorthodoxy behind. Perhaps we can even bargain some of the Unorthodoxy’s secrets out of him, now that his loyalty lies elsewhere. If nothing else, it would not do to antagonise the Builder while he is still in the process of moving our planet for us.”

“Wise,” Erigo said. “You have received a fine reward when all you did was provide some low-level ritual magic.”

“You truly have forgotten yourself as a messenger,” Vesta Carmis Zell told him.

“Adapting our magic so that the lesser species can use it was a task completely below us. Having our ritualists lower themselves to do so cost them dignity, which is more precious than Zithis Carrow Vayel can understand.”

“I have told you his name,” Erigo said. “I will not remind you again.”

“We apologise,” Jamis said. “Please excuse us, Erigo Fin Desca. We have internal issues to discuss, and I promise more civility when we speak again.”

“I will go and supervise the proceedings directly,” Erigo said. “See that civility is maintained the next time we speak or this planet goes nowhere.”

Jamis gestured and the transparent wall rippled like the surface of a pond. Erigo floated through, accelerating swiftly in the direction of the planet. When he was gone, Jamis turned on Vesta.

“I recognise that you don’t have any interest in our actual goals on Pallimustus,” he told her, “but you would do well not to antagonise the Builder’s servant. It is not yet time to make the Builder our enemy, and while you may not care about that...”

Jamis walked over to Vesta.

“...I do,” Jamis finished. He stared up at Vesta who would have stood taller than him even if she wasn't floating.

“Every astral king in this room,” Jamis continued, “other than you, Vesta Carmis Zell, is focused on our larger goal and not some personal project.”

“You have no say over my agenda or my actions,” Vesta shot back.

“That is true, so long as you do not take something that is not a problem to us and make it one.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your nascent astral king?”

“You mean the Asano boy? How do you know about him?”

Jamis responded with a laugh.

“I need him for the moment,” Vesta said. “I will kill him when that need is done.”

“I would recommend against it,” Jamis said.

“He has to die. He’s turning into an astral king. He has already started replacing my mark on the souls of my messengers.”

“So? This council represents the strongest of the astral kings. There are many others, and even a few powerful eccentrics who have declined to be part of our little group. They are no problem to us, so what do we care if their number grows by one?”

“But he is not a messenger.”

Jamis laughed again.

“I forget how young you are, Vesta Carmis Zell. I do not fear the rise of another original.”

“Original? What does that mean?”

“It does not fall to me to teach you history.”

“Asano threatens to become more than just an astral king. He claims domains like a god and employs intrinsic-mandate magic.”

“An astral king with their own unique abilities?” Jamis asked, clutching his hands in front of him. “That’s never happened before, whatever shall we do?”

“You mock me, but if left to his own devices, he can become a powerful enemy.”

Jamis laughed once more.

“Every person here is an enemy to everyone else in this room, yet we work together regardless.”

“You think Asano will work with us?”

“Perhaps. Forever is a very long time to say something will never happen. But, for now, his concerns are too small for the likes of us to care about or obstruct. With the exception of yourself, of course.”

“And if his concerns grow larger?”

“Then it will be in concert with his power. He might have the strength to be a challenge to your agenda, Vesta Carmis Zell, but you are the one who chose to pursue a separate goal from the rest of us. You might find yourself in a position where he has the strength to cause you trouble, but that is not the case for the rest of us. By the time he is powerful enough to fight for the purification artefact, it will already have been found and claimed. Preferably by us. He also has little interest in it. Like you, his goals and ours move in different directions.”

Vesta narrowed her eyes.

“How do you know so much about him?”

“You said it yourself: he is a potential threat. Only a fool would ignore that, so I took an interest. And, as it turns out I agree with you; he is a threat, but only a potential one. Should his interests and ours clash once he has enough power to be worth dealing with, then deal with him we must. But if we went around annihilating every potential threat, our entire species would spend their entire lives roaming the cosmos, smiting silver and bronze-rankers. We’d have to start wiping out planets just to save time. That, I’m sure you’d agree, would be more trouble than it’s worth.”

“Asano is different. He isn’t just some ordinary threat.”

“He is different, yes. The confluence of events, circumstances and powers that came together to shape him is extraordinary. But the cosmos is far more vast than you can imagine, Vesta Carmis Zell. At this very moment, there are more people with equally

extraordinary stories than your mind is capable of comprehending. Let me assure you that the way to deal with these people is to leave them alone.”

“If you know so much, do you know what happened to the diamond-ranker you all saddled me with?”

“Yes,” Jamis said. “And since his killer's agenda does not interfere with ours, I will leave the matter alone. If you want to pursue it, that is for you to do on your own. But, as with Asano, I recommend you follow my lead and let the issue lie.”

“Even if I was willing to swallow my pride over a jumped-up silver-ranker, I still have need of him.”

“Jumped-up silver-ranker? A moment ago he was a terrible new astral king ready to bring us all down with his unheard-of powers. You need to settle in your own mind if you're dealing with a genuine threat or an insignificant bug who has come to unlikely prominence. He can't be both.”

“For now, he is the latter,” Vesta said. “Left to his own devices, he will become the former.”

“Then I advise you to leave him to his own devices. People like Asano, who find themselves at the crux of great events, have a habit of enduring everything thrown at them and coming back stronger. And those who placed them in the crucible are left forgotten in the ashes of history. Asano is not a threat to the agenda of anyone in this room except for you. You are more interested in your personal hobbies than our collective interest and that is your prerogative. Asano is only a problem if you make him one, and none of us will interfere if you make that problem yours. But if you make it mine, then my first course of action will be to feed you to him and see if that solves it.”

“You would choose him over me?”

“You are the one who called him a future threat, and you were right. Today, you are a member of this council and he is some essence user that I can ignore. A hundred years from now, you will be in the exact same place you are now, but where will he be?”

“A century from now I will not be in the same place,” Vesta insisted.

“Right, your little hobby. Do you really think another soul forge will make that much difference?”

Vesta's eyes widened for the slightest moment before she regained her composure.

“Oh yes,” Jamis said. “I'm fully aware of what you're after, Vesta Carmis Zell; I just don't care. I will give you my advice anyway, knowing full well that you will ignore it: Find better ambitions. Stop scavenging for power outside the group and turn your efforts to

seeking out the purification artefact. Becoming a critical player in our greater plans will serve you better than carving your own path.”

“Of course you would say that.”

Jamis laughed.

“I am biased, it’s true. But my advice stands. Asano has made an unreasonable demand of your Voice of the Will. Use it as a chance to withdraw and restrategy without losing face.”

Vesta narrowed her eyes again.

“You’ve been paying close attention.”

“No, Vesta Carmis Zell, I have not. My information comes from paying a regular amount of attention without you ever noticing. Perhaps you should dwell on the ramifications of that when considering my advice.”

Chapter 714

The Instinct to Kneel

Inside Jason's soul realm, Jason and his team were sorting through the massive amount of loot they had picked up during the Battle of Yaresh. With both Neil and Jason having loot powers, there was more than a little of it. They were in the shadow of the central pagoda, in a courtyard where items were sitting in a massive pile.

This was not the first session of sorting through the pile, or even the first pile. Items were sorted into things the team wanted now, things they would keep until they were gold-rank and could use them, and a donation pile. This was the largest collection by far, with items donated for use in the restoration efforts where possible, or sold to fund it where not.

"I like having a flight item, don't get me wrong," Neil said as he patted his new belt. "It still doesn't seem fair that Humphrey got all the cool items. He even got another die for the dice set that modifies his summons. He didn't even use them in the fight."

"Yes, because what that battle needed was even more summons," Belinda said. "We could have distributed pamphlets to all the adventurers to explain which summons to attack and which ones to not attack."

"Lots of people used summons," Neil pointed out.

"Not a whole contingent of them," Jason said. "How many do you call up these days, Humphrey?"

"Twenty," Humphrey said. "Some of the rolls on the new die can change that, though."

"I would have loved to get my hands on that amulet that strengthens conjurations," Jason said. "I'll admit that Hump's armour and swords are more important than my cloak and shadow arms, through."

"You can have my gauntlets," Humphrey said. "This amulet is much stronger, but they do the same thing."

"As if you didn't have a stupidly strong amulet already," Belinda pointed out to Jason. "Not all of us have amazing items that grow stronger as we do."

Jason, Clive and Neil had the decency to look sheepish. Jason had the cloud house and his amulet, while Neil and Clive both had items claimed during the Reaper trials before Belinda joined the team.

"I want to know what Jason took from the diamond-rank messenger," Sophie said.

“Diamond-rankers drop diamond-rank items,” Jason pointed out. “I can hold them for only a few seconds before my body has a negative magic reaction. I had to keep them all in my soul realm.”

“We’re in your soul realm,” Clive pointed out.

“Fine,” Jason said. “There is some stuff I’m looking into maybe using, to be honest, but it’s all on the backburner while we deal with everything else. But if you really must—”

“Mr Asano,” Shade interrupted, emerging from the shadow at the base of the wall. The whole team started jeering.

“You set that up so you wouldn’t have to tell us,” Neil accused.

“No, but I’ll keep that in mind for the future,” Jason said. “What is it, Shade?”

“The messenger strongholds, Mr Asano. The messengers look to be abandoning two of them.”

Jes Fin Kaal watched from atop a domed tower as the messenger forces poured into the stronghold, consolidating their forces from the two abandoned locations. Another messenger flew up to join her in floating just over the dome. Hess Jor Nasala was only silver-rank but she had come to rely on him as her chief assistant and mouthpiece.

“The commanders continue to voice their objection to abandoning two more fortresses,” Hess informed her.

“I am aware of their concerns.”

“They have asked me to warn you that it will leave us in a strategically unsound position should events underground not go as we intend.”

“Strategic position is irrelevant. If we do not get what we want from the natural array, there is nothing else here for us. Once affairs below ground are settled, whatever the outcome, we leave.”

“They have further asked me to point out that if the servant races accept your terms only as a ruse to launch an attack, our position is compromised with only two remaining defensive positions.”

“They won’t,” she assured him. “I’ve made sure their mediocre ritualists have enough information to confirm the threat to their city. The only reason they would compromise their chances of saving it by attacking us is if they intend to evacuate and give up on the region entirely. We still have informants enough in the city that I will learn their intentions with more than enough time to respond. But I believe that the concerns of the commanders go beyond the strategic, do they not?”

"Your insight is accurate, Voice. I believe the questions of strategy are to avoid reprimand for questioning your ideological soundness."

Kaal's slight smile didn't reach her eyes.

"They are unhappy over striking a bargain with the servant races."

"Yes, Voice. I must confess that I am also uneasy at the proposition."

"And why is that, Hess Jor Nasala?"

"Because it begs the question of what can they do that we cannot do ourselves? If they are lesser, why must we rely on them?"

"This is not a new question. You know the answer. If our people descend, they become tainted. It is not that the servant races can endure it because they are superior, but because they are already tainted themselves. The magic down there is able to stain the pure souls of messengers, but servant races are tainted already. That is how they endure. There is nothing new about sending servant races on tasks that are below us in places we do not wish to go."

"But this is different," Hess told her. "We are not just instructing our slaves to do our work for us."

"No," Kaal agreed. "We sent in our slaves and they lacked the will."

"Which means that we are not telling them to do as we bid. We are asking, and that is what has left so many of us, including myself, unsure about this course of action."

"You worry that we are putting the servant races on a level with ourselves by negotiating."

"Yes, Voice. That is our concern."

"Tell me your thoughts on Jason Asano."

"He is... troubling. He is not one of us, yet he also is, in the ways that matter. So much of what makes us superior is shared by him. And he is an astral king, or close to it. I felt his aura myself and..."

"...and?" Kaal prompted.

"I felt the instinct to kneel," Hess confessed.

Kaal nodded.

"He is not below us, yet he is not *of* us," she said. "It means that we are left with three reactions to choose from. One, we can deny and destroy him as an aberration. Two, we can accept that he actually is one of us. Or three, we can acknowledge that we are not the only superior beings."

"The overwhelming consensus is that the first option is the correct one, Voice."

"I happen to agree. But how would you do it? Mah Go Schaat tried to kill him and fell dead at his feet. Do you know how? Can you be certain you would not share the same fate? Would you be willing to fight him, Hess Jor Nasala?"

"No," Hess admitted. "I would not."

"Jason Asano will die. We will have him walk into the fire of his own accord, serving our ends even as he meets his."

"But is not manipulating him instead of dominating him a form of acknowledgement?"

"Yes, but in truth, we have acknowledged him many times. You, yourself just said you would decline to fight him, and that decision would be a wise one. You saw the frenzy he put our people in during the attack on the city. You saw the ragged gold-rankers after they desperately escaped his pyramid fortress. We acknowledge others all the time, Hess Jor Nasala. Great astral beings. Gods."

"He is neither a god nor a great astral being. He's a silver-ranker."

"Yet, in defiance of everything we understand about astral kings, he is one of them. He is an enemy there is no shame in acknowledging, and there is no greater glory than destroying a worthy enemy. Especially when doing so gives you exactly that which you seek. Return to the commanders and tell them that if any amongst them have no need for glory, they may come and discuss it with me. If any of them accept that offer, prepare a list of replacements for me to approve as they will not be coming back."

The next large meeting to take place in Emir's cloud palace had several differences from the last one. The floor didn't bounce, and the government delegation had undergone some personnel changes. Calcifer Bynes was absent, as were his guards, Ikola and the one whose name Jason hadn't picked up before Allayeth had thrown the man into a portal. In the place of Bynes was another elf who looked much the same, but older.

The vast majority of the Aristocratic Faction in Yaresh had gained their ranks through monster cores. As a group, they valued money and political influence over personal power, but there was no escaping the fact that most of Pallimustus disagreed. This meant that any aristocratic family without standard-bearers to wield traditional forms of power would fall into irrelevancy.

For the Bynes family, the chief standard bearer was Gormanston Bynes. The father of the man who had left the previous meeting in such an undignified scramble, he was the new lead representative of the Yaresh civic administration. Unlike his son, he had no title; all he required to maintain his place in society was his name.

Gormanston Bynes had not a trace of monster core within his aura. He was not as pretty as his son, despite having the same gold-rank. Where ranking up had given Calcifer the elegance of a palace, his father had the blunt, stark beauty of an impregnable fortress. A weathered fortress, with the signs of aging that took an extremely long time to show on a gold-ranker.

Gormanston was taller than his son with a broad frame that exuded speed and power. Unlike Neil, whose clothes played down his physique, he was an elf that showed off a physicality that was rare for his people. From his dress to his gait to the way he sat in a chair, Gormanston Bynes looked like a coil waiting to spring.

“So, that’s the dad,” Jason said from within a privacy screen. Another difference in this meeting was that the various groups were each under privacy screens. Following the messenger acceptance of Jason’s terms, the various stakeholders were all looking to serve their various agendas. Jason hoped that most of those agendas involved saving the city.

“That’s him,” Allayeth said. She and Jason were their own little group at the front of the room with the rest of Jason’s team at the back.

“He looks more serious than his son,” Jason said. “Are you sure he won’t be cranky about what happened to Junior Bynes at the last meeting?”

“I am. From what I know of the man, he’ll be thankful for weeding out weakness. He has other children, and I’m surprised he came in person instead of sending one of his daughters. I imagine whatever he managed to get out of Calcifer about what’s on the other side of your portal intrigued him.”

Jason gave her a side glance but she maintained an innocent expression.

“Yes, I’m also intrigued,” she admitted.

“We can talk about it after the meeting,” Jason said. “If I’m too important to kill, I might be open to a little show and tell.”

They took their seats as Emir filled the room with cloud furniture. The director of the Adventure Society, Musin Heath, was once more at the front. He took out the box containing the box containing the communication orb, releasing the seals that prevented any spying by the messengers via the orb. He set the orb on the table and glanced surreptitiously at Jason. Jason gestured subtly with head gestures and Musin turned the orb back and to the side, adjusting until Jason gave him a nod.

“You realise that it hasn’t gone unnoticed that only you, out of everyone in the room, can tell which way is up for the messenger’s magical device,” Allayeth told him.

“Anyone who knows anything is already aware that, magically speaking, I have more in common with the messengers than with anyone on our side.”

Every privacy screen in the room shattered simultaneously as an overwhelming aura settled over the room.

“It’s not just magically speaking,” a disembodied voice spoke.

“Dude, I’m in a meeting,” Jason said. “Also, now I have to explain the context of what you just said to everyone here if they want to understand it, and we were all using privacy screens for a reason.”

“I just thought I could contribute,” the voice said.

“That’s a bucket of horse manure and you know it,” Jason said. “Don’t come in here with your half-arsed power-plays.”

“What’s a horse?”

“The bottom half of a centaur, now sod off. I’m expecting a call.”

“Would it help if I was here?”

“No! I’m pretty sure they hate you a lot more than they hate me.”

“That’s true,” the voice said. “If you need anything, though, just ask. We’re all quite keen to kick them off our world.”

“Yeah, because that’s totally why you’re making a spectacle of yourself.”

“That’s rich, coming from you.”

“Yeah, well... shut up. Look, the blue ball is flashing; I have to take that.”

“Fine,” Dominion said and his presence faded away. This left a room full of people staring at Jason as the communications orb gently strobed.

“He totally knows what a horse is,” Jason complained.

Chapter 715

Acceptable Terms

Jason looked around the room, then focused on the gently strobing blue orb.

"Is no one else going to...?" he asked. "I'm just going to go ahead, then. If the evil angel sorceress thinks we're screening her calls she might get cranky with the negotiations."

Jason stood up and awkwardly slinked over to the communication orb on the table. When he reached out and touched it, a projection of Jes Fin Kaal appeared over it.

"G'day," Jason said. "How've you been? Oh, right, you've been moving. That always sucks. It's why I keep my house in a bottle and just take it with me. That being said, it's always being used these days to screen for apocalypse worms or feeding homeless people, and those are both your fault, so... I'd appreciate you being less evil, I guess?"

"Are done talking nonsense?" she asked.

"No," Jason said through laughter. "I'm really, really not."

"I have met your demands, Asano. It is now time that you listened to my proposal."

"Yeah, that's fair," Jason said, calming down. "I said I'd listen if you did the thing and you did the thing. So, let's hear it."

"The natural array deep underground is unstable. You know this as well as we do."

"I also heard that was your fault. You were messing about with forces you don't understand."

"I understand them perfectly well, Jason Asano."

"Oh, you didn't mess up and turn the natural array into a very slow time bomb that sends all your messengers squiffy? It sounds like you don't need us at all. Should I just hang up?"

"There is always the potential for unforeseen complications with magic, Jason Asano."

"Yeah, that's true," Jason acknowledged. "Your track record doesn't exactly fill me with confidence that you have a solution, though."

"The only reason anything went wrong in the first place is that we were unable to complete our task before we were forced to flee the array's effects. All we need is for someone less susceptible to the array's effects to complete what has already been started."

"To summarise, then, you messed up your evil plan, the after-effects of which threaten to destroy this city and a good chunk of the landscape around it. You propose that we finish your plan for you, giving you everything you want?"

"And saving the city."

"What's left of it after another of your evil schemes, yes. You understand why we aren't excited about the choice between annihilation and giving you everything you came here to get."

"Yes," Kaal agreed. "But as you say, one of your options is annihilation. That means you have to act on the alternative, however unpalatable."

"Unless I take the unmentioned option three," Jason pointed out. "I walk away. I know that the people in this room will still want to work with you, but can you work with them? Will all your little indoctrinated drones stand for that?"

"It would seem that the messengers in your possession have been talkative. Since it no longer matters, I will ask this: was Marek Nior Vargas a part of the Unorthodoxy?"

"The what? Unorthodoxy? I thought your kind didn't have religions. If you're willing to put some information about that on the table, I might be willing to make some extra concessions. Actually, I do have my own messengers, as you pointed out. I might just go ask them."

"Then do so, but we are here for a reason. You do not want the city destroyed and you do not want to deliver to me what I want. But the nature of compromise is that you make accommodations to get what you want, Asano. Stomping your feet and demanding to get everything while giving up nothing is a child's tantrum, not a negotiating position."

Jason nodded reluctantly.

"Let's start by determining exactly what you want from us, then."

"I need a force of your essence users to descend to the natural array and use a device that will stabilise it. I need you to lead it, regardless of rank make-up because, as you said, my people will not tolerate trafficking with someone who is not one of us."

"Are you trying to isolate me from my own people?" Jason asked, his voice amused. "I'm not one of you, Voice, and I don't think your minions would like you saying I am. There are ways in which I'm like you, certainly, but your kind has too many flaws. You're inferior."

"You think you can anger me?"

"I think that you were once a freshly budded messenger, just like the rest of them. I think you may have moved past the indoctrination but there are still some hooks left in you. That kind of treatment never goes away, not completely. It becomes part of you."

"You have a few stolen scraps of knowledge and think you know us?"

“Oh, I’ve looked deep inside your kind, Jes Fin Kaal. Did your astral king not tell you? She has to know because she felt it. She felt me reach inside her messengers and remake what they are. If Vesta Carmis Zell didn’t tell you that, she sent you into this negotiation blind. And if she’s been keeping secrets from you, I think we both know that she’s hung you out to dry.”

“My astral king shares and hides what she wills; it is hers to do so. If there are secrets she keeps from me, it is not my place to know them. You shall not provoke me this way.”

“Won’t I? You’re not eating up the simple lies anymore, Voice. You can’t be if you want to carry out your function with even a modicum of competence. Which means that you know the questions and see the contradictions. There’s something wrong and you can feel it, but you’re too afraid to ask.”

“I have no interest in this discussion,” Kaal told him. “If you cannot keep to the negotiation at hand, there is no point continuing this conversation.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “You wouldn’t believe the truth anyway. It’s hard to throw off a shackle when you think it’s a lifeline, and it will take more than me to convince you. Instead, let us talk details.”

Jason and Kaal went over the proposed operation in detail. A mixed group of silver and gold-rankers would descend into the access shaft that the messengers had been keeping the surface dwellers away from. They would then need to navigate whatever state the underground denizens were in from the effects of the unstable array, set up a device provided by the messengers and keep it secure for as long as it took to activate.

“And you’re confident that whatever kinks made the device go wrong in the first place have been worked out?” Jason asked.

“There were no ‘kinks,’ in the device. The only issue was our inability to stay and keep it secure long enough to take full effect.”

“Even if that’s true,” Jason said, “how do you know the old device will work in the new conditions? The magic is getting pretty soupy down there, by all accounts.”

“We have been monitoring the magical conditions far more accurately than your primitive ritualists. The astral king has built a new device that will adapt to any variances in the magical conditions.”

“Oh, someone built a dangerous thing and took every variable into account. That’s definitely not the start of a thousand sci-fi disaster movies.”

“You have nothing to contribute but worthless doubt,” Kaal told him. “You have neither the knowledge nor the power to understand the device, let alone craft an

alternative. Your questions are pointless because you must accept the device we provide or none of this matters.”

Jason sighed.

“I’m getting very tired of making choices I don’t like because the alternative is a city blowing up or the planet getting sucked out through the side of the universe. Alright, we’ll use your device.”

“Of course you will; stop wasting my time. My being immortal does not mean I am willing to endure your vain attempts to confuse or frustrate me by indulging in irrelevancies from your world.”

Jason winced.

“Oof, you’ve got my number. Alright, I think we have the details of the job covered. That leaves the price.”

“Your city will not die. That is the price.”

“It’s not my city, and we’ve already talked about what happens if I walk away. There will be a price because a few weeks ago your people came in here and trashed the place, and you don’t get to pretend that’s acceptable. I wouldn’t be too worried; the locals won’t trust much of anything you give them. I looked at their list and it’s pretty much just a huge pile of spirit coins and the magic you used to knock up those fortress strongholds so quickly. The rituals shouldn’t be that complex. They’re confident they can scrub through them for any nasty surprises you slip in there, and they’ve got a city to rebuild.”

“Those sound like acceptable terms. But what do you want for your part, Jason Asano?”

“I want Mah Go Schaat’s study. I’ve been watching and I know you haven’t managed to break into it yet.”

“You have the keystone,” Kaal realised. “You managed to loot it from Mah Go Schaat’s body.”

Jason felt auras stir with greed from various points around the room. The people in the meeting well-informed enough to know the name of Mah Go Schaat also knew how valuable his possessions would be.

“I do have the key,” Jason said.

“And will you share the spoils with the people in that room with you?”

“It depends on what’s in it,” Jason said. “And how nice they are about asking.”

“Are you sure they’ll stop at asking?”

"They'll stop or be stopped," Jason said. "I hope for the best in people, but I've learned to prepare for the worst. But I'm going to pass you off to the city's representatives, now. Give them most of what they want or I'll back out of the whole thing."

Most of the room's occupants were over the shock of a god's presence and had been listening to Jason's negotiating style with a mix of trepidation, horror and disdain. Jason patted the Adventure Society director on the shoulder.

"Good luck, cobber. Tell me how it goes."

Jes Fin Kaal and the occupants of the room then watched Jason saunter off.

Jason walked into the workroom in his soul space where Clive had a workroom set up. White walls were covered in Clive's notes, the walls taking marks from Clive's finger like a whiteboard. The tables were covered in notes and measuring devices secured from the Magic Society, showing every measurement they had managed to get from the magical emanations rising from deep below ground.

"Hiding from the people wanting to talk about Dominion paying you a visit?"

"Yep. How's the research going?"

"I have very little idea how to even prepare to examine this device the messengers will give us. There just isn't enough information to work with."

Jason looked around at the walls covered floor to ceiling in Clive's scrawled notes, along with tables piled high with folders, notebooks and crystals with aura recordings.

"Okay," he said.

"Obviously, we can't trust the device the messengers give us," Clive said.

"Agreed."

"But I have no confidence at all in deciphering what it does in any remotely practical timeframe."

"That makes sense," Jason acknowledged. "The data you have on the natural array is secondhand at best, and the messenger device will use magic more advanced than what this world has."

"It may even be uniquely bound to messenger magic," Clive said. "Our best bet is to bring the device into your soul space. You can copy it perfectly here, allowing us to disassemble and examine it safely."

"Not a chance," Jason said.

"Why not?" Clive asked.

"Because I think you're wrong about being able to do so safely. If I were a devious astral king-"

"Which you are."

"Hurtful, but to continue: I would look at someone like me, and a device like the one we're dealing with, and see an opportunity. Traditional soul implants, like star seeds, aren't going to work on me. But I'm just a half-cooked astral king and Vesta Carmis Zell is the real thing. She's also known for soul engineering."

"Soul engineering," Clive said with a shudder. "Necromancy but worse. It's almost unheard of in Pallimustus. The only example I've seen was that sword with a disembodied soul as a container, and that was in an astral space. It wasn't in Pallimustus proper."

"Well, this astral king is something of an expert, according to the messenger commander I've got locked up in here. She may well be capable of building something that can harm me if, of my own volition, I bring it past the defences of my soul."

"Such as a mysterious device you want to examine, thinking nothing can hurt you," Clive realised.

"Exactly."

"Then we're stuck trusting this device?"

"No," Jason said. "We may be able to go halfway. You know what most astral kings can't do?"

"I'm going to go with 'be humble,'" Clive said, getting a laugh from Jason.

"That's definitely true, but I'm talking about my spirit domains. The realm inside my soul is something every astral king has a version of. My spirit domains are something else, though. I don't have the same power there, because they're a claimed patch of regular reality instead of a homebrew universe. It might be enough to dig out whatever nasty secrets this device holds without letting it inside my soul. I'll have to take my cloud house off cafeteria duty long enough to turn it into a proper spirit domain, but we need to get a good look at this device without exposing my soul to it."

"Will that be effective?" Clive asked. "I genuinely have no idea how any of your strange soul powers work. This might be a good chance to discuss that, actually."

He started looking around the messy room.

"Let me grab a notebook and I'll start going through some... Jason? Oh, you disappeared, that's very mature. Come back here. I'm inside your soul, Jason, I know you can hear me!"

Chapter 716

Actual Adventurers

Jason and Allayeth watched the cloud palace break down into thick fog that obscured the area and replaced the smell of ash and wet mud with a fresh, clean scent. It was slowly drawn into the cloud flask like a massive genie returning to its bottle.

"I'm surprised the city was willing to use the construction magic provided by the messengers so quickly," Jason said.

"I believe that using it to replace your building is a large part of that," Allayeth told him. "The Adventure Society is, I believe, largely on your side. They understand what you've done and how hard you fought for the city during the Battle of Yaresh."

"Plenty of people fought as hard or harder."

"But not quite so loudly," Allayeth pointed out. "You made something of a spectacle of yourself, and more than once. But the way you did it, along with various other concerns, have left the non-adventuring portion of the city elite voicing various concerns."

"Other concerns?"

"You keep doing things the way the messengers do them. Your aura is like theirs and you've hardly been discreet in demonstrating this. During the battle, they challenged you in rather unusual fashion; what people are calling aura speech. You responded not just in kind but in such a way as it resonated over the battleground. Not to mention that you occasionally float around the same way they do, you still refuse to hand over the messenger prisoners, you won't—"

"Point made," Jason acknowledged. "Although I did most of that in direct opposition to the messengers. You said that the city elite were *voicing* concerns, not that they genuinely held them."

"I did say that, yes."

"So they're using me as an easy punching pug to rail against."

"Your rather bold way of conducting yourself has certain unconventional advantages, Jason, but there are very good reasons that most take a more decorous approach. When you mark yourself as an outsider, you make an easy target for exclusionary political tactics."

"I'm familiar with the approach. On my world, my political enemies painted me as a shady, untrustworthy figure as well."

"How did that work out for them?"

"I don't know. I stopped paying attention, saved the world and got out. I wasn't in the best place back then. I say back then, but it hasn't been that long since I left. I've been working a lot on letting go of my anger and vengefulness."

"And how is that going?"

"Calcifer Bynes came out of my portal on his feet. A year ago he would have come out in a bucket."

"That would have had ramifications."

"And that's always been my problem; people keep warning me of ramifications, without considering the ramifications of crossing me. So, I started to show them. I didn't like where that took me. There's a saying on my world about people who fight with monsters and the dangers of becoming monsters themselves. I went further down that path than I like and it's taken me the better part of a year to walk it back."

"And have you?"

"Not all the way and I never will. The danger of that path is that you have to go that way, at least a little, if you're going to fight monsters. The temptation is to keep going. To be the power. It's so easy to justify every step until you find yourself somewhere you can't justify being. At that point, you have to either go back or change who you are, and that's where you lose yourself."

"He still has some way to go," Arabelle said, emerging from the fog. "He still struggles to stand still for more than a minute without explaining how dark and edgy he is to the middle distance."

Jason gave her a thin smile.

"Because I keep finding myself in circumstances that make me confront these issues all over again."

"And you always will," Arabelle told him. "Which leaves you the choice of whining about it for the rest of your life or learning to accept it without a near-constant stream of brooding monologues."

"I'm working on it."

"I know."

"Was there something you wanted, Arabelle?"

"Emir asked me again if you would be willing to speak with his associate."

"I've sensed her probing the cloud house. She hasn't been very polite about it."

"She's a diamond-ranker, Jason. She doesn't have to be."

Jason's expression turned hard and he glanced briefly at Allayeth, then shook his head.

"I am so very tired of being weaker than everything I have to deal with," he muttered.
"Shade, grab the flask when it's done."

"Jason..." Arabelle said. He ignored her and opened a portal arch to his soul realm. He went through and Arabelle made to follow but was repelled by the curtain of energy. The energy vanished and the arch vanished into the ground. Arabelle sighed.

"He normally responds well to some light teasing," she said.

"That was my assessment as well," Allayeth said. "Has something changed?"

"There is little I can share, as Jason is under my care. And even if he were not, my first loyalty is to him, not to you."

Allayeth ran an assessing gaze over Arabelle.

"I have found that the people around Jason lack much of the fearful reverence most have for diamond-rankers. Is that his influence?"

"That, and when you spend enough time around Jason, you meet more than just diamond-rankers."

"Like Dominion randomly appearing in a meeting?"

"Yes."

"Why did a god choose to make that display? I don't believe for a moment that it was a simple whim."

"I have my guesses, but I would not presume to understand the reasoning of a god. Like people, how they portray themselves is no sure indicator of their true nature or intentions. Look at the god Deception taking the role of Purity without anyone knowing. For centuries he warped the church towards the more exclusionary and intolerant aspects of purity as a concept."

"It still unsettles me that the other gods never informed us."

"The gods have their rules, just as we do."

"That fact also unsettles me, along with leaving me conflicted. I'm not sure if I like the idea of the beings that guide the world having rules I don't understand. It makes me wonder about their motives, which is an uncomfortable position to find myself in. I also wonder why the rules are there, and how they are enforced. To what degree can they act beyond their remit?"

"You should talk to Jason about it."

"He has answers?"

"No, but he enjoys the questions. As you saw, he treats the gods the way he treats everyone else."

"Why do they tolerate it?"

“You wondered why Dominion would appear before us all and allow Jason to talk to him like that. Perhaps showing us that he would was the point.”

“I thought you wouldn’t presume to understand the reasoning of a god?”

“That’s why I said ‘perhaps.’ It was a guess.”

“What does showing that he would tolerate Jason like that accomplish?”

“Do you look down on Jason, Lady Allayeth?”

“No.”

“No? There isn’t some part of you that looks at him and files him away under ‘just a silver-ranker’ in your mind?”

“Not *just* a silver-ranker, no. But he is a silver-ranker.”

Arabelle looked at the spot where Jason’s portal vanished.

“I wouldn’t presume to tell a diamond-ranker what to do,” Arabelle lied, “but I would advise against letting Lord Charist make any more oppressive moves towards Jason.”

“I am not his keeper.”

“Aren’t you? I will take my leave, Lady Allayeth.”

The fog had much diminished over the course of their conversation, but a goodly amount was yet to return to the flask. Arabelle walked into it, vanishing from Allayeth’s senses.

The Adventure Society director, Musin Heath, was seated behind the desk in his office, staring at Vidal Ladiv.

“I’m sorry, they did what?” Musin asked.

“They took a contract, Director,” Vidal repeated.

Musin ran his hands through his hair and let out a groan.

“Why would they do that?”

“They are adventurers, Director, and there is no shortage of contracts, as you know. After the attack on the city, there are too few adventurers and too many tasks.”

“I’m well aware of that, Ladiv. I was the one who implemented the campaign to get the inactive adventurers who stepped up to defend the city to stay active. My point is that Asano is the focus of some very important events right now.”

“I would point out, Director, that what you described seems to be Jason Asano’s normal circumstance. If he didn’t take contracts while embroiled in major events, I’m not sure he ever would.”

“I would be okay with that.”

Musin let out a weary sigh.

“What contract did they take?”

“I’m sorry, Director, but I have misspoken. It’s *contracts*, plural.”

“Multiple contracts?”

“There’s an open sweep-and-clear for the northern regions. They’ve registered for that.”

Musin nodded. “The northern regions have been underserved since we started focusing on the infested towns to the south. What else?”

“They’ve claimed a lot of the high-difficulty, low-reward contracts that most adventurers avoid. I spoke to the jobs hall officials and they said they were about to increase the listed reward on most of them. They even offered and Asano’s team declined.”

“I see,” Musin said, then leaned back in his chair. “They’re looking to rank up.”

“That will take years. They’ll be lucky to reach gold by the next monster surge.”

“And if they don’t get started, it’ll take until the monster surge after that. Can you imagine what it’s like being silver-rankers under so much gold and even diamond-rank scrutiny?”

“Yes, Director,” Vidal said flatly and Musin snorted a laugh.

“We’ve made you the message boy in a hailstorm, haven’t we, Ladviv?”

“Asano’s team also collected other contracts, Director. Based on the locations they were choices to fill in the gaps of their intended route. It seems they will be heading out of the city and moving north-east. They’ll make a large, zig-zagging loop and then return to the city from the north-west.”

“How many contracts did they take?”

“Seventy-four.”

“Seventy-four? How long is that going to take them?”

“They’ve reported three as complete so far, Director.”

“They’re delivering reports to the jobs hall through Asano’s shadow familiar?”

“Yes, Director. They have estimated between four and nine days, but any number of factors make it hard to predict.”

“And they’ve done three already. When did they take the contracts?”

Vidal pulled out his pocket watch.

“Approximately six-and-a-half hours ago, Director.”

“They’re keen, I’ll give them that. At least if they’re going to go off and do something, it’s being actual adventurers. If that was the worst behaviour I had to deal with, I’d be the happiest Adventure Society director in the world.”

Musin leaned his elbow on his desk and his forehead in his hand.

"Asano has obligations," he said. "The force to head underground is being formed, with his team as part of it. He also needs to be present for the handing over of the thing he asked for from the messengers."

"I asked him about that before he left, Director. On the latter, he said that he will teleport in as appropriate. As for the force, sir, he made it clear that while he does not need to lead it, he will not be subordinate to it."

"Did you tell him that's not how Adventure Society expeditions work?"

"I did, Director. He said that once the Adventure Society has publicly redressed Lord Charist for invading his home, he would be happy to discuss adherence to society protocols and institutional integrity."

The director closed his eyes and rubbed his temples.

"I'm getting a headache. Should that even be possible?"

"It seems to be going around, Director."

"And by going around, do you mean around Asano?"

"I do, although diamond-rankers tend to elicit similar symptoms. With the extended monster surge, they have been acting far more publicly than normal."

"I knew it," Musin said. "I knew as soon as I got the reports from the Rimaros branch that Asano would be a diamond-rank problem. I have no idea what they were thinking with this false identity business; he was obviously going to become very overt, very quickly."

"This is why you voiced your public support for Asano?"

"You're new to Yaresh, Mr Ladiv. One of the features of our — usually — fine city is that it has two diamond-rankers that are here with reasonable frequency, reasonably openly. One of the results of this is that anyone in my position is required to do their best to manage said diamond-rankers, which is roughly as easy as wrestling a tornado that just passed through a cooking oil warehouse."

"I don't think that's possible, Director."

"No, it is not. And Asano has that feel. The more I read the reports about what he's done, how he's done it and who he's done it with, the more I got that feeling. With a diamond-ranker, Mr Ladiv, all you can do is get on board or get out of the way. Maybe, just maybe, you can nudge them slightly in a direction that won't leave you spending the next month cleaning up after them. Once it was clear that Lord Charist had failed to pressure Asano and Lady Allayeth would be taking charge, I decided to get on board with Asano."

"You may pay for that politically, Director."

"That may be so, Mr Ladiv, but it's still the right choice."

"May I ask why?"

"Because the point of my job isn't accruing political power. The Adventure Society exists to protect the populace. Sometimes that means putting up with people who are a pain to deal with. For all of Lord Charist's headstrong bluster, Lady Allayeth's schemes and Jason Asano's brazen absurdity, each one of them acts in the cause of what they think is right."

"And we just have to hope that what they believe to be right is the same as what we do?"

"We can nudge, where we're able. I've found Lady Allayeth quite reasonable in that regard. She mostly ignores me, yes, but at least she listens first. Lord Charist and Asano don't seem as amenable, but I believe they hew close enough to my own sensibilities."

"Then you will not attempt to curtail Asano and his team's contract activities?"

"Have you read Asano's file?"

"It's restricted, Director. I don't have the authority."

"Well, suffice it to say that time and again, Jason Asano and his team have demonstrated not only that they'll do the right thing but that they'll spot it before most everyone else. Did you know that while Asano was still believed dead, his team discovered that the messengers were preparing to invade? That man Standish is some kind of magical genius. The Magic Society screwed him over and now they're desperate to get him back in the fold."

"And you want to avoid that mistake with Asano?"

"You're damn right I do. He already threatened to give up his Adventure Society membership. I think that was more to make a point than his actual intention, but there's no way I'm going to test that man's resolve."

"Because of what you've read in his file?"

"For a start. The messengers, who won't deal with anyone, will deal with him and think he's some kind of king. The god of Dominion — the god of deciding who gets to be king — showed up for a chat, and not for the first time. If anyone is fool enough to treat Asano like a silver-ranker, they'll pay for it."

"Like Calcifer Bynes."

"Exactly."

"Are you concerned about his father?"

"Not yet. Asano clearly has a role to play, and Gormanston Bynes is nothing if not efficient in squeezing the value out of his enemies before putting them down."

"And after?"

“Bynes is part of the Aristocratic Faction. More than anyone else, they respect powerful backing. I’m hoping he looks at the beings standing behind Asano and backs off.”

“Is that likely?”

“I don’t know. Asano rolled his son, but he hates weakness, especially from his own people. He’s also smart, and going after Asano is not. If anything, I think Gormanston will try to use or ally with him. Asano may have the etiquette of an explosive device, but he is not weak.”

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."

Chapter 718

Not Like the Ones We Know

In a section of rainforest characterised by tall but intermittent trees rising above the canopy, Jason's cloud palace had taken the form of treehouses connected by rope bridges. The balcony of the largest treehouse has a sequence of hammocks hanging out over the jungle canopy below and most of the team were laying back, lazing and napping in the mid-morning sun. The missing members were Clive, Rufus, Sophie and Humphrey.

"Are they ever going to come out?" Taika asked, laying back with a plate of sliced fruit on his chest.

"Yeah, because you look like you can't wait to get up and get to work," Neil said.

"Leave them be," Jason said. "They're probably tired."

"From what?" Neil asked. Belinda snickered a laugh.

"Let's just say I beefed up the soundproofing on their treehouse last night," Jason said.

Humphrey and Sophie emerged from their treehouse together and everyone turned to look at them with huge grins. Humphrey pressed his lips together as he glared at them, then grabbed Sophie's hand. She looked uncharacteristically startled, going stiff for a moment before squeezing his hand as they moved over the rope bridge together. When they arrived at the central treehouse, Sophie panned her gaze over the team, challenging anyone to make a joke. Everyone hurriedly laid back in their hammocks, Taika complaining as Jason floated a slice of fruit from Taika's plate through the air.

"Sorry we got up late," Humphrey said. "We should probably get to it."

"We already got to it," Jason said. "We knocked off that nest of frog-hippo things right after dawn. Clive is out scouting the location of the next contract now."

"You sent Clive?" Humphrey asked.

"He sent himself," Belinda said. "He wants to broaden his adventuring skill base."

"And if something jumps him and he dies because he's alone?" Sophie asked. "He won't sense a gold-rank monster coming."

"He's got Onslow," Taika pointed out. "I wish I'd gotten a familiar."

"Plus, Shade is with him," Jason said. "And I'm keeping an eye on his aura."

"How far away is he?" Humphrey asked.

"About twenty kilometres that way," Jason said, pointing. "It's nice being out of the city. I can spread out my senses without picking up on thousands of essence users. Very relaxing. Also, Travis, Farrah, Gary and Rufus aren't too far from Clive either."

“They’re putting up some kind of tower to run tests,” Neil said. “Something about not blasting magic through a city.”

“They’re attempting to use magical resonance to communicate across relay points,” Belinda clarified. “What they have now triggers the magical senses of everyone in the area. Essence user senses are too sharp, especially at decent rank. They’re trying to calibrate it so that it uses ambient magic without disrupting that magic. Then, it will be like the background magic of any city filled with essence users, something people can just ignore.”

“I’m pretty sure they’re going to attract monsters as soon as they turn it on,” Jason said, then furrowed his brow. “That might be handy, now that I think about it. We could crank the thing right up, draw in all the monsters and clean up. It could make our sweep and clear mission a lot easier.”

“And how many monsters do you want to face at once?” Humphrey asked.

“I’m plenty used to fighting lots of monsters at once.”

“And how many of those were gold-rank? We’re in a high-magic area, Jason; the odds of bringing multiple golds down on our heads would be higher than I’m willing to tolerate.”

“Fair point,” Jason acknowledged. “Still, how convenient is that tower to set up?”

“It’s about ten metres tall, so not very,” Belinda told him.

“Shame,” Jason mused. “There’s potential there. Maybe the Adventure Society could set some up permanently and just turn them on when they want to lure in the unintelligent and aggressive monsters. Once they...”

Jason trailed off, floated out of his hammock and looked off into the distance.

“I think Clive has run into something,” he said.

“Danger?” Humphrey asked as the others exited their own hammocks.

“Not sure,” Jason said. “He’s found the elementals, but there’s something odd about their auras.”

A circle of glowing runes appeared in the air and a portal appeared in the middle of them a moment later. Clive, covered head to toe in mud, squelched through. His equally muddy familiar floated through after him, the tortoise’s big eyes looking mournfully out from a face caked in filth. The team rushed to gather around him, making sympathetic noises.

“What did you do to the poor little guy?” Sophie said.

“We need to get him into the showers and washed off,” Belinda said. “Clive, go scrub yourself down in that creek over there.”

“Seriously?” Clive asked, holding his arms out to his sides.

“Please don’t drip in the cloud house,” Jason said. “I know it looks like wood flooring but it’s not.”

To make his point, the mud dripping off Clive and Onslow was being wicked away and absorbed by the floor.

“I know I put a lot of crystal wash in the cloud house, but even though it’s diluted in the showers and the cleaning water, the supply isn’t infinite.”

“Oh, isn’t it?” Clive asked.

“No,” Jason said evasively, his eyes darting in Belinda’s direction briefly before his shoulders slumped. “She told you, didn’t she?”

“That you’ve been talking with Jory over a water link about setting up a dedicated alchemy facility exclusively for crystal wash? Yes, she has.”

“Lots of teams have auxiliary adventurers,” Jason said. “It’s not strange to have an alchemist on call.”

“It is when their only job is to make cleaning products,” Clive said. “There aren’t any alchemists doing that.”

Clive frowned, his expression suggesting he had a thought he wasn’t happy with.

“Okay,” he said. “Yes, there are some auxiliary adventurers who are alchemists that mostly make cleaning products.”

“There are?”

“Clean up teams,” Humphrey said. “You don’t see them so much in smaller cities and low-magic areas where the adventurers don’t specialise as much. In the bigger cities, they have teams dedicated to cleaning up after monster manifestations in urban areas. They literally clean up messes, clear out lesser monster infestations and hunt down any loose monsters summoned during larger fights. There are several teams of this sort in Yaresh leading the hunt for any leftover naga from the egg thing the garuda ate.”

“As much fun as it is talking about soap,” Neil said, “what put you in such drastic need of it?”

“You know how the contract said moderate-sized water and earth elementals?”

“Oh, they merged,” Humphrey said.

“Ah,” Jason said. “That’s what I sensed.”

“Yes,” Clive confirmed. “We now have a very large mud elemental to deal with.”

“Never again!” Neil declared as the team arrived back at the treehouse through Jason and Clive’s portals.

“What?” Jason asked. The others all turned to glare at him. He, Sophie and Belinda were all clean while the others were covered head-to-toe in foul-smelling mud and worse-smelling ichor.

“Jason,” Neil said through gritted teeth. “Not all of us can deflect mud when it’s being flung everywhere.”

“Why am I the problem? Sophie deflected it with her wind powers and Belinda had that hardcore magic umbrella.”

“The issue isn’t so much the mud,” Humphrey said. “That would be an unpleasant but acceptable part of the job.”

“The problem,” Neil said, “is that someone used magic so that the mud monster could bleed and rot. So, when it turned into a mud tornado, it was also a gooey, rotting flesh tornado.”

“Oh, come on,” Jason said. “I already cleansed all the diseases you picked up from it.”

He looked at the rest of the team.

“Okay,” he said. “From your expressions, what I’m taking away is that you feel that cleansing the diseases after the fact isn’t a sufficient response. I’m noting that for future reference so I can take a different approach next time I paint you in rotting corpse meat.”

“Oh no,” Neil said. “There’s no need for ‘future reference’ because you don’t get to fight any more mud elementals. No water elementals and definitely no wind elementals.”

“But fire elementals are alright?”

“Absolutely not,” Sophie said. “The smell of burnt, rotting flesh? No thank you.”

“You didn’t even get muddy,” Jason complained to her. “In fact, I saw you wind blast a bunch of gunk away from you and onto Neil.”

“It was you?” Neil asked, wheeling on the very clean Sophie. “I thought that was Jason.”

“Why would it be me?” Jason asked. “I don’t have wind abilities.”

“We don’t know that,” Neil said. “You’re always pulling out some nonsensical new soul power. It could have been spirit wind or something.”

“Ghost farts. You think I’m making ghost farts.”

“Ghost farts,” Clive said, “is where I leave in search of an adult conversation. Or a shower.”

The non-clean members of the team, which was the majority, made agreeing sounds and marched inside.

“Hey, don’t forget that very lovely stream out there,” Jason called after them encouragingly. “The crystal wash really won’t last if you keep—”

They all felt a massive magical explosion with their supernatural senses, the sound following like thunder after lightning. They rushed back onto the balcony and looked out as a cloud of dirt and dust rose far above the rainforest canopy. It was dozens of miles away, but the mushroom-shaped cloud would have been easy to spot even without silver-rank vision.

“What is that?” Neil asked.

“Can’t tell from this distance,” Clive said.

Jason took enough crystal wash vials from his inventory for everyone and floated them to the team using his aura.

“We’ve still got a few minutes on the portal cooldowns,” he said. “Clean up while Shade turns into something fast and we’ll fly there. We’ll pick up the others on the way.”

The black private jet was still some way from the mushroom cloud of dust when the plane dissolved into a cloud of shadows. Jason and his companions, now including Farrah, Rufus and Gary, all fell from it and into the air. Only Travis had been left behind, ferried back to the tree house by one of Shade’s bodies in the form of a winged Heidel.

“I can feel what you turned into,” Jason scolded his familiar. “What’s wrong with a regular Pegasus?”

“I believe you have more important things to hold your attention, Mr Asano.”

As the team fell, Sophie activated her flight power, taking control of the wind around them.

Ability: [Leaf on the Wind] (Wind)

- Special ability (movement, dimension).
- Cost: Moderate mana-per-second.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Silver 4 (47%)

- Effect (iron): Glide through the air; highly effective at riding the wind. Can reduce weight to slow fall at a reduced mana cost. Ignore or ride the effects of strong wind, even when this ability is not in active use.

- Effect (bronze): Moderate control of nearby airflow while in use. Cost of gliding reduced to low mana-per-second. Strong winds increase your rate of stamina and mana recovery, even when this ability is not in active use.

- **Effect (silver):** Fly for moderate mana-per-second; highly effective at riding the wind. Gliding no longer costs mana. You can control the airflow around you, including using winds to carry others with you when you fly. Carrying others increases the ongoing mana cost and incurs a speed penalty, both scaling with the number of people carried.
-

Sophie's wind-based flight could scoop up others to let them fly as well and she used it on Belinda, Clive, Rufus and Gary. Jason used his cloak to float while Humphrey, Farrah and Taika conjured wings. Neil plummeted as he fumbled at his belt buckle while tumbling end over end. Finally, he managed to activate the flight power enchanted into the belt and arrested his fall, waiting for the others to catch up in their more sedate descent.

"That's hilarious," Neil said to Sophie. His words were sarcastic but the team were sincere in voicing their agreement.

"Do you all want to get healed or not?" Neil asked them and they all looked away with unconvincing expressions of innocence.

"Is anyone sensing anything from that cloud?" Humphrey asked. "All I'm getting is some kind of elemental energy. Jason, you have the sharpest senses."

"There is something in there," Jason said. "Lot of... creatures? Could be elementals. They're infused with elemental power, just like the cloud. I can only pick them out because it's more concentrated."

"If there are elementals, Jason has to leave," Neil said. "We just talked about this."

"Anything else?" Humphrey asked, ignoring Neil.

"Adventurers," Jason said. "We aren't the only team responding."

"Hardly a surprise," Sophie said. "You can probably see that cloud from Yaresh."

"Anyone we know?" Humphrey asked.

"Korinne's team," Jason said. "Rick's too; they came through a portal with a gold-ranker. I think..."

Jason trailed off and turned narrowed his gaze at the plume.

"I know what's in there," he said. "Messengers, but not like the ones we know. There's something wrong with them."

"If they're infused with elemental power," Clive said, "that suggests that these are the warped messengers from underground that we heard about. I think they might not be underground anymore."

"Okay," Neil said. "Jason doesn't have to leave."

Chapter 719

A Juice Newton Situation

Summoned familiars occupied parts of their summoner when not manifested. Colin occupied Jason's blood, Shade his shadow and Gordon his aura. Clive's familiar, Onslow, became a magical tattoo on Clive's abdomen that he could tap into for elemental power.

Clive, like Jason, favoured practical combat robes, with his lighter colour preferences that made him a Jedi to Jason's Sith. Onslow's tattoo lit up, visible through the robes, transforming into energy that passed harmlessly through the fabric. The energy gathered together, manifesting into Onslow's familiar rune tortoise shape, his legs dangling as he floated in the air.

Onslow's shell expanded, detaching from Onslow himself who became an adorable, child-sized humanoid tortoise. The sides of the enlarging shell were largely open, the gaps filled with a wind magic barrier. Sophie moved the team members she was holding aloft with her flight power inside, the two wind powers gently stirring the air as they came together without impeding one another.

The members of the team with self-propelled flight made their way in as well. They joined the others as they observed the humungous dust cloud, still some distance away. Like Onslow, the cloud was charged with elemental energy, but where his powers were in balance, the cloud had specific affinities.

Sensations of fire, earth, ash and magma pushed against the team's perceptions as they moved closer to the giant mushroom cloud. It increasingly loomed over them, dust and ash choking the air. It stung their eyes and left the air tasting smoky, bitter and dead.

They could see tall, angelic silhouettes moving through the murk. Some were making their way out of the cloud, moving to intercept teams of adventurers approaching through the air and across the ground. The terrain below was rough, the rainforest having been flattened for kilometres by the explosion that created the cloud.

Onslow approached the cloud at a steady but cautious speed as Clive used his Enact Ritual power to draw ritual circles made of golden light on the floor and ceiling. Belinda observed him, her eyes darting over the glowing diagrams.

"These aren't the usual protections you employ to protect Onslow," she said.

"No," Clive said, not pausing his work. "These are rituals for channelling elemental energy. They should be able to absorb at least some of any elemental power that comes our way, feeding it to Onslow. That will help recharge his elemental powers and reduce my

need to feed him extra mana, all while offering additional protection. It's not as effective against physical attacks, but I have a feeling that we're heading into a firestorm."

The figures started emerging through the dust and ash enough that they could make them out. As expected, they were messengers, but unlike the ones they were familiar with. Clearly altered by elemental energies, they unleashed elemental attacks at the approaching adventurers. This did not yet include Jason and his companions, but many teams had rushed ahead with more speed than caution. Cones of fire, stone spears, streams of magma and clouds of ash were sent at the adventurers.

The messengers were noticeably different from their unaltered counterparts, the elemental influence on their bodies extremely evident. The group observed four subtypes, each conforming to one of the four power types of elemental attack being tossed around. The messengers were all naked, sexless and androgynous, like the dolls of children, stripped of clothes.

Two of the messenger variants were more visually spectacular than the others. Those throwing out fire also had flames rising from their heads instead of hair. The feathers of their wings alternated between glistening red metal and ruby-like crystal, fire playing across them. Their skin was black and fire shrouded their hands and feet. The ones throwing out magma had skin that was not just black but featured the hard gloss of obsidian. Their wings were obsidian shards outlined by magma, matching the glow of their eyes.

Farrah looked at the magma variants as they clashed with adventurers.

"They're stealing my whole motif," she complained.

"Perhaps if you hadn't given up adventuring to start a business they would have been more respectful," Rufus suggested.

"Coming from a guy who gave up adventuring to become a teacher," she shot back.

"I'm in Jason's team now, aren't I? Anyway, it's an allowable diversion for me. My family runs a school."

Jason took a tray of liquor shots from his inventory and floated them to the group members using his aura.

"Oh, come on," Rufus complained. "I don't think this is the situation for drinking games."

"Oh, it's not just time for drinking," Jason said after the team downed their shoots and he collected the glasses. He put away the tray and took out a cube the size of a basketball with concentric rings engraved on each side. "It's time to rock."

“Rock?” Clive asked, peering at the cube. “Is that some kind of earth element device?”

“No, it’s an arse-kicking device,” Jason said. He took a recording crystal from his inventory and fitted it into a small slot of the cube. He threw it out of Onslow’s shell and it started to rise slowly into the air, blasting out noise. The magic enchanted into it projected the sound all across the battlefield.

“What is that noise?” Humphrey yelled.

“Metallica,” Farrah said through voice chat. “Heavier than I’d normally go for, but if you’re fighting flame-spewing angels from the bowels of the earth, it’s not really a Juice Newton situation.”

“What kind of juice?” Rufus asked. “I don’t think anyone should go to Jason’s planet. It makes them turn strange.”

Jason and Farrah flashed grins at each other and leapt from Onslow’s protective shell, shadows taking the form of black flying motorcycles under them and hauling away through the air. Jason’s shadow cloak trailed behind him and Farrah conjured her fire wings that did the same.

“Why are you riding off on vehicles?” Neil asked through voice chat. “You can both fly.”

“Because it’s more metal,” Jason said.

“Shade made those vehicles out of shadow-stuff,” Neil said. “There isn’t any metal.”

“I was thinking that perhaps we should devise a plan before rushing off,” Humphrey suggested. Taika, one of the few people that towered over Humphrey, put a meat slab hand on his shoulder.

“The music’s playing, bro. Time to rock and roll.”

Taika also leapt from the safety of Onslow’s shell. He transformed into a giant golden bird and rocketed after Jason and Farrah, swiftly gaining on them.

“This is music?” Humphrey asked. “The guy just asked if he was evil, then said that he was!”

“I like it,” Sophie said, then kissed him gently on the cheek. “See you out there.”

In a blur, she was also gone.

“Does no one see the value in making a plan?” Humphrey asked. Rufus put a hand on Humphrey’s shoulder, just like Taika had.

“Plans are great,” Rufus told him. “But sometimes there’s a giant explosion and you just have to go out and fight. Take it from a guy who failed as a team leader: it’s not always

about having a clever plan. Sometimes it's about getting out of your own way and trusting your amazing teammates to be amazing.”

Humphrey sighed.

“Alright,” he said. “Onslow, speed us up if you please.”

Onslow accelerated the pace of his shell, propelling it closer to the dust cloud.

“I still say this isn't music,” Humphrey muttered.

“What is that noise?” Korinne asked. “Is it some kind of sound attack?”

“I think it's music,” Zara said.

“If someone is using a song essence aura to produce that,” Korinne said, “I'm worried about the state of their mind.”

“I believe it is Jason Asano,” Orin offered. “I have heard this sound when I met with my uncle in the training room in Asano's vehicle.”

“Why is he projecting it now?” Korinne asked.

“I don't know,” Zara said, “but I think I like it. It makes me want to hit things.”

“Good,” Korinne said. “We've got no shortage of things to hit.”

The other two elemental messenger variants didn't have flames for hair or parts of their bodies glowing magma, but they were no less a departure from the messengers the group had seen in the past. Those with an affinity to ash retained the shape of normal messengers but were entirely white-grey as if coated in chalk. Ash swirled around them and they fired off rough white orbs that exploded into clouds of obscuring ash and burning cinders. The last variant had affinities for earth and metal, looking like mosaic statues made from shards of stone and different coloured metals.

Jason and Farrah were the vanguard as they headed for the cloud, now close enough to cover the sky. They did not remain in the lead, however, with Taika and Sophie blazing past them as more messengers emerged from the cloud to meet them. Taika, in the form of a giant golden eagle, was the first to strike, crashing into one of the metal and earth messengers.

Ability: [Momentous Charge] (Swift)

- Special attack (movement, combination).
- Cost: High mana and stamina.
- Cooldown: Four minutes.

- Current rank: Silver 0 (01%).

- Effect (iron): Charge attack. Rapidly gain [Momentum] during the charge. Can culminate in a non-combination special attack.
 - Effect (bronze): Can cover extreme distances and move through the air. The speed of the charge escalates over the duration of the charge.
 - Effect (silver): The damage from [Momentum] is enhanced by your speed at the moment the attack lands.
 - [Momentum] (boon, magic, stacking): When making an attack, all instances are consumed to inflict resonating-force damage. Multiple instances can be accumulated and instances are lost quickly while not moving.
-

Taika's first battle as a silver-ranker had been an awkward fight in the corridors of Jason's cloud palace. It was a situation that did not allow Taika to fully express his power set that excelled with wide open spaces and the chance to make long, charging attacks. His Momentous Charge had been accumulating power from the moment he had left Onslow's shell, unleashing it as he struck. He didn't peck with his eagle's beak or claw with his talons, instead ramming his head into the messenger, maximising the raw physical impact. Chunks of stone and fragments of metal burst off it like a sculpture struck by a cannon.

Ability: [Unstoppable Strike] (Swift)

- Special attack (movement).
 - Cost: Moderate mana and stamina.
 - Cooldown: One minute.
 - Current rank: Silver 0 (01%).
 - Effect (iron): Melee attack. If any instances of [Momentum] are triggered by the attack, they deal an amount of disruptive-force equal to the resonating-force damage.
 - Effect (bronze): When combined with a movement-combination special attack, the physical momentum of that attack is extremely hard to impede. Physical barriers and constraints are struck with resonating-force damage. Magical barriers and constraints are struck with disruptive-force damage. Resistances to any effect that impedes motion are significantly increased for the duration of the combination attack.
 - Effect (silver): The cooldown of this ability is reset when using a movement-combination special attack, allowing this ability to be combined with that attack.
-

The combination of powers, used under optimal conditions, made a wreck of Taika's target. Even so, no silver-rank being was easy to kill and the elemental powers of earth and metal reinforced the messenger all the more.

Taika did not stick around to finish the job, despite the messenger's condition. While he shared Humphrey's qualities of power, mobility and strength, their roles were similar but not the same. Humphrey was a brawler, using speed, power and toughness to make life hard for his enemies. His ability to keep up with enemies and sustain brutal levels of attack power made him an unrelenting opponent that often secured kills for the team. Taika was an initiator, using overwhelming speed and incredible burst damage to put enemies on the back foot. He was heavy cavalry, except giant and a bird.

Taika didn't have Humphrey's sustained damage, so he roared off in another charge attack as Humphrey teleported in to finish the severely damaged messenger. This new charge attack did not accelerate over time until it rivalled Sophie's pace, but it still let him move faster than anyone but her.

Ability: [Speed and Power] (Swift)

- **Special attack (movement, combination).**
 - **Cost: Low mana and stamina.**
 - **Cooldown: None.**

 - **Current rank: Silver 0 (02%).**

 - **Effect (iron): Melee attack. Gains an instance of the [Relentless Attack] boon.**

 - **Effect (bronze): When instances of [Relentless Attack] are consumed, gain that many instances of [Momentum].**

 - **Effect (silver): May be used as a charge attack by increasing the mana and stamina cost to moderate, granting additional speed for the duration of the attack. Speed increase enhances flight more than ground speed. When combined with a non-combination special attack, a number of instances of [Relentless Attack] are immediately generated based on the damage dealt. Using this ability multiple times in succession progressively increases the mana and stamina cost.**

 - **[Relentless Attack] (boon, magic, stacking): Consume all instances of this boon to reduce the cooldown of a special attack. The cooldown reduction has an increased effect on movement special attacks.**

 - **[Momentum] (boon, magic, stacking): When making an attack, all instances are consumed to inflict resonating-force damage. Multiple instances can be accumulated and instances are lost quickly while not moving.**
-

Taika's first charge attack had landed him amongst the enemy, so there were plenty around as he made his second. This gave him the chance to use an aspect of his shape-changing power as he flew to the next target, gathering air around his wings and shooting it off in bolts of compressed air. The damage was far from exceptional but the bolts exploded on impact, sending messengers scattering. As a result, they had trouble forming up to meet the team following in Taika's wake.

Ability: [Block Out the Sun] (Wing)

- Special ability (shape-change).
- Cost: High mana and stamina.
- Cooldown: Four minutes.

- Current rank: Silver 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Bird form with high speed.

- Effect (bronze): Giant bird form with high speed.

- Effect (silver): Gather wind energy while moving. That wind can be used to make compressed air attacks. These attacks do not interrupt any movement special attacks in progress.

Taika's Unstoppable Strike power had its cooldown reset by being combined with his first charge ability, making it available to combine with his second. Taika struck the next earth-type messenger like a missile, smashing off chunks. The second charge power also generated the Relentless Attack buff, which Taika immediately consumed to reset the first charge power. As combining Unstoppable Strike again had let it reset its own cooldown, Taika once more launched the combination of charge power and special attack at the next target.

By this time, the team had engaged with the messengers that Taika's opening moves had placed firmly on the defensive. Sophie was barely visible flickering between the messengers at a pace that made even Taika look slow. Where Humphrey was following up on Taika's big hits, she was following up on his air bursts, keeping the messengers from achieving any group cohesion.

The team, by comparison, were falling into easy synergies. Humphrey finished off the earth-type defenders Taika had already hammered, exposing the less-sturdy fire, magma and ash types. The fire and magma types output the most destructiveness, largely countered by Neil's timely shields and Farrah intercepting attacks. Farrah didn't just block the flames and magma but absorbed them, refilling the mana spent on costly attacks.

Farrah's blasted her Lava Cannon and Obsidian Shard Storm abilities at the ash-type messengers who were trying to impede the team with clouds of ash and burning cinders. These were being quickly dispersed by Sophie's wind, Farrah's flames and Belinda, copying and locking the messenger's powers from the safety of Onslow's shell.

Rufus, despite the inability to fly, was harassing the fire and magma messengers in the backline. Clive opened a portal for him and from there he used the messengers themselves as platforms, showing off the agility he had been trained in from birth. His short-distance teleport powers, Flash Step and Flash of Moonlight, allowed him to move from foe to foe, leaving behind savage sword wounds before moving on.

With his flashy sun powers, Rufus was the light to Jason's shadow, both men moving from enemy to enemy. Already, butterflies glowing orange and blue were emerging from several messengers, seeking out more victims upon which to spread afflictions.

"See?" Rufus asked Humphrey through voice chat as the group dominated the messengers. "Sometimes you just have to trust the ability of your team."

"I still say this 'music' isn't necessary," Humphrey grumbled as Gary dropped past him, legs wrapped around a messenger. The huge leonid, covered in heavy armour was plunging through the sky, hammering the messenger with a short-handled mallet.

"Did anyone tell Gary he can't fly?" Neil asked, watching from Onslow's shell. "I think he's hitting it in time with the beat."

Chapter 720

A More Practical Purpose

The mushroom cloud of dust and ash covered a huge area, and all around it, teams of adventurers were clashing with the messengers altered by elemental power. One of the first things Jason had done on coming into contact with one was to touch his hand to it briefly.

Converted Messenger (ash, silver rank)

- Messenger abilities suppressed.
- Able to conjure ash bombs.

The elemental messengers were noticeably weaker than the regular variety, most evident in their lack of aura control. Instead of the usual precise and oppressive force, their auras lashed out in waves of suppressive power, strong but inconsistent. Any well-trained adventurer could handle the intermittent spiritual attacks, fending off what was normally a messenger's strongest weapon.

They were also lacking in intellect; reduced to animalistic instincts. They understood enough to work in tandem, but failed to move beyond placing the strong ones at the front and the destructive ones at the rear. They failed to adapt to any strategy but the most obvious, allowing the adventurers to get the upper hand.

On the ground, Clive and Farrah were standing at the edge of a circle of scorched earth. The blast that created the mushroom cloud had levelled a huge area of rainforest and Farrah had burned away the felled trees and crushed undergrowth to create a space for Clive to work. He drew a cubic ritual diagram from sparkling golden light, a box comprised of framework lines and floating sigils.

As he worked, a stray gobbet of magma the size of a motorcycle plunged through the air towards the cube. A stream of blue and orange light shot in from the side and transformed into Jason's familiar, Gordon. One of the orbs floating around Gordon turned into a shield and intercepted the attack.

"Thank you, Gordon," Farrah called up at him. He responded with a complex strobing of his orbs before turning back into a light stream and flashing away.

"Do have any idea what that flashy-light language means?" Farrah asked Clive. "I have a translation power, now, and I'm getting nothing."

"I also have a translation power, and I have no idea. Do you think Jason is just pretending to understand it?"

"No," Farrah said. "He'd do that to us, but he wouldn't do it to Gordon."

After completing the diagram, Clive chanted a brief incantation. Flames ran across the lines of the box for a moment before sputtering out almost immediately. He and Farrah walked around the cube that was twice as tall as they were, looking it over.

"Seems sound, Farrah said.

"Give it a test?" Clive suggested.

Farrah cast her Fire Bolt spell and the box absorbed it, much like she had the powers of the fire messengers. The flames were dispersed across the lines and sigils before being drawn in and vanishing. Farrah pointed out a section where the golden lines had dimmed noticeably as they drew in the fire.

"You might want to touch that up," she said.

"I saw it," Clive agreed. He redrew the section and repeated the incantation. Another test showed that the weak area had been repaired.

"Do we do a proper field test of this one first?' Farrah asked, "or go straight to the other three."

"Let's field test," Clive said. "It should be able to hold one."

They looked up at the sky where messengers and adventurers still clashed in the air. They both had sufficiently acute vision to pick out the distant figures, at least those close enough to not be entirely obscured by dust. Farrah pointed, using her aura to guide Clive's eyes.

"That one."

"Okay," Clive said.

Farrah moved into the cube, the golden lines tingling her body as they passed through her and strobing for a moment once they had. She stood in the middle of the cube, looking up. Clive pointed one arm at her and another to the sky and then incanted a spell.

"Exchange your fates."

Farrah vanished and was replaced with a fire-type messenger, while she appeared in his place up in the sky. Now at the back of a messenger formation, she opened up on them with her strongest attacks. Down below, the flame messenger was barely phased by the abrupt translocation, firing a blast of flame from its hands almost immediately.

Clive raised an eyebrow as fire struck the edge of the box. Instead of passing through the open space between the lines of the magical cage, the flames were contained by an invisible barrier. The fire messenger charged forward, bouncing off the same barrier.

“Adequate,” Clive assessed, then proceeded to draw a second cube next to the first.

“That’s a lot of butterflies,” Jason said as he floated in the air, looking at a wall of blue and orange. The butterflies were so thick that they were obscuring the messengers behind them. Many of the butterflies were destroyed by attacks from the messengers, exploding in colourful blasts of disruptive-force energy. The gaps were swiftly filled as more butterflies spawned from the already-afflicted messengers.

“Is there some kind of limit on how many butterflies you can have?” Taika asked. He was back in his human form but had a pair of golden wings holding him aloft.

“Not numerically,” Jason explained. “They aren’t actual living things; they’re energy constructs that look and behave somewhat like butterflies. They come from an affliction that Gordon’s orbs can inflict. The affliction continually takes tiny bits of mana from the target and turns them into the butterflies. The butterflies carry all the afflictions of the person they were created from, including the one that creates more butterflies. If the butterflies can find an enemy before the bit of mana they’re made of runs out, they dump all the afflictions on the fresh victim. If not, they peter out.”

“Bro, I don’t want to sound like I’m on the other team, here, but I think it sounds better when you call them enemies, not victims. Otherwise, it sounds like you’re rounding them up to do experiments on.”

Jason pointedly avoided looking down towards what Clive was doing.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he said slightly too casually.

“How do the butterflies know who’s an enemy?” Taika asked.

“You know, I have a few powers that only affect enemies, or affect them differently from allies. I’ve never figured out to my satisfaction how they tell the difference. It almost has to be some kind of aura interaction, but that raises a lot of questions. As a test, I’ve tried forcing myself to think of something as an enemy when it, strictly speaking, was not.”

“Some *thing*, not someone?”

“I thought it would be best to try it on the most disdainful, despicable thing I could conceive of, to make it easier to think of as an enemy, even though it technically wasn’t.”

“What did you go with?”

“Frozen meals for one.”

“You might want to try it on a person, bro.”

“That never seemed very ethical.”

“That’s a good point; the whole victims-versus-enemies thing. You know, you could probably wipe out a whole city with those butterflies. If the city was full of your enemies.”

“Being in a city full of enemies is something I’ll generally try to avoid.”

“You say that bro, but we all know what you’re like. It’ll probably happen and it’ll probably be your fault.”

“You think there’s a city full of people that hate me that much?”

“Bro, you blasted Metallica over the battlefield. I bet you freaked a lot of people out.”

“That does not warrant a city full of mortal foes.”

“Also, I don’t think you picked the right song to start with. It was okay, but I would have opened with *Master of Puppets* or *Trapped Under Ice*. Or maybe mix it up with some AC/DC. *Thunderstruck* would be awesome to have a fight to.”

“I’m waiting to fight someone with lightning powers to use that one.”

“Bro, if the bloke you’re fighting is the one with the lightning powers, wouldn’t *Thunderstruck* be you putting on a soundtrack for the other guy to kick the crap out of you instead of the other way around?”

“Huh,” Jason mused. “You might be right.”

“You should put it on now and we’ll go find some more bad guys.”

“No, most of the remaining messengers are all staying in the cloud. They’re aggressive but not completely unintelligent, and they’ve seen how badly they’re losing against the adventurers.”

“You can sense around the whole cloud?”

“Yeah. Hasn’t your perception started filtering the sensations to get a better handle on the situation?”

“Nah, bro. That sounds like some next-level stuff.”

“Well, you’re silver-rank now; welcome to the next level. Do some meditation practise and see how it goes.”

“Bro, I’m flying in the air and we’re still in a battle.”

“Think of it like spiritual resistance training. I’ll be your spotter.”

Taika’s expression turned thoughtful.

“Like doing bench presses with your soul.”

“Exactly,” Jason said. “Which leads me to one question: do you even lift, bro?”

“Bro, that’s ice cold. Okay, let’s do this.”

They flew over to Onslow’s shell and Taika sat cross-legged atop it, eyes closed. Jason stood watching over him for a moment, then some cloud material spilled out from the shrunken cloud flask hanging around his neck. It formed a chair for Jason to settle into, eating a sandwich and leafing through a book as he watched over Taika.

Rufus teleported onto the shell in a flash of silvery moonlight.

“What are you doing?” he asked Jason.

“It’s meditation training,” Jason said.

Rufus’ eyes rested on the sandwich.

“Yes, it looks like you’re engrossed in contemplating the mysteries of the cosmos.”

Jason gently waved the book in his hand.

“This is astral magic theory, so technically, I am. And the bad guys are pretty much done for; we’re just letting the familiars get some practise in before the butterflies finish all the stragglers.”

As Jason suggested, Gordon was floating around with Belinda’s lantern familiar, shooting beams and bolts of force at messengers rapidly rotting away under the weight of Jason’s afflictions. Stash was also present, in the form of what looked to Jason like a woodpecker the size of a bulldozer. He hovered in place, wings buzzing like a hummingbird as his beak pounded at an earth-type messenger like a jackhammer. He quickly gave up on that approach, however, spitting out gobbets of rot caused by the afflictions.

“You could just join Taika,” Jason suggested to Rufus.

“It does seem like it would be good perception training, trying to push your senses through all this obstruction,” Rufus acknowledged. He was moving to sit down when Jason stood up suddenly, the cloud chair returning to the flask as he put away the book.

“What is it?” Rufus asked.

“The fight just finished,” Jason said.

“What do you mean?” Rufus asked, then turned his head as he sensed what Jason already had: two diamond-rank auras moving through the air at blinding speed.

Charist and Allayeth had arrived from Yaresh, Charist flying superhero style while Allayeth sat in what looked like a throne made from glittering lights. They slowed down and split up as they approached the massive cloud. Charist gained altitude and vanished into the murk as Allayeth descended, making her way to one of the gold-rank adventurers for a quick discussion.

“We should regroup,” Humphrey announced through voice chat. “How are things on the ground, Clive?”

“We’re more or less at capacity here,” Clive said.

“Very well, we’ll converge on you. Jason, it might be time for you to take in that...”

He paused before reluctantly finishing.

“...‘music’ device.”

“Bro,” Taika said as he got to his feet. “I think Humphrey might like old man music. Do you have any Foster and Allen?”

“No,” Jason said. “I do have some young people music made so long ago that the people who made it are old now. Do you think he’d like the Hollies?”

“If he doesn’t,” Farrah said, “I’m not sure he’s on the right team.”

“You don’t get to say that,” Humphrey told her. “You’re not even on this team.”

“She’s right about the Hollies, though,” Sophie said.

“Do you even know who that is?” Humphrey asked.

“Humpy, Jason and Farrah brought back a whole different world worth of music. Have you not listened to any of it?”

There was resounding silence in the voice chat until finally, Gary spoke up, his voice trepidatious.

“Did you just call him Humpy?”

“No,” Sophie said, uncharacteristically flustered.

“No!” Humphrey said, just as fast.

Everyone fell silent again, each person connected to the voice chat almost hearing Humphrey’s sweat as they waited for Jason to voice an opinion of Humphrey’s new nickname.

“Well, I think it’s sweet they’re becoming more comfortable as a couple,” Jason said. “Gary, where are you?”

“I’m riding to the ground by holding onto a messenger. I’ve left his wings alone so he can fly but I’m too heavy in my armour and we’re descending steadily. I figured out that if you hold one leg and one arm, you can kind of steer them.”

“Isn’t the messenger attacking you?” Humphrey asked, eagerly jumping into Jason’s merciful change of subject.

“Yeah, but it’s one of the fire ones,” Gary said. “It’s not accomplishing much. The heat’s making my undies a little swampy.”

As they chatted, Jason, Taika and Rufus moved from atop Onslow’s shell to the inside with Neil and Belinda as it descended towards the ground. The sound projector floated down and into the shell as well, as directed by a control device Jason took out. He waited for the last song to finish before removing the recording crystal and turning it off, however.

They reached the ground and disembarked from Onslow’s shell, which shrank down to encase the familiar who resumed his normal tortoise form. Clive and Farrah were

standing by what were now four cubic cages, set out in a square. Each one was crowded with around a dozen messengers, each cube holding a different type, trapped and alive.

“That seems to have gone well,” Jason said.

“You weren’t the one who had to keep going in to be switch-teleported,” Farrah complained. “It got very unpleasant as they filled up.”

Jason turned his head as he felt Allayeth attention fall on them. A few seconds later she arrived in a blur of her sparkling throne. She stepped off of it and took a small bottle from a dimensional pouch at her waist. She unstopped it and the cloud of lights was drawn in, after which she sealed the bottle and put it away.

“What do you have here?” she asked, looking over the arrangement of prison cubes.

“It’s a prison array,” Farrah explained. “It cyclically employs the elemental energy of the prisoners to reinforce the array. The prisoners themselves fuel their imprisonment through an energy drain that keeps them from having the power to break out. It only works because there are distinct elemental forces with uniform subsets that we can use to cycle the energy. You can’t suppress elemental power with the same element.”

“And you just happened to have a ritual array for exactly that?”

“Farrah is the array specialist,” Clive said. “I just helped tweak the specifics.”

“Meaning that I had an idea and Clive figured out how to make it work in about four minutes by himself instead of four weeks with a research team,” Farrah classified.

“Interesting,” Allayeth said. “We should leave that discussion for now, however. Jason, I understand you have some kind of sound projector?”

“Yep. You want to make a request?”

“Tina Turner,” Farrah suggested. “You don’t know musicians from Jason’s world, so just trust me.”

“Thank you,” Allayeth said, “but I had a more practical purpose in mind.”

Allayeth took a recording crystal from Jason, made an announcement into it and then placed it into the projector and tossed it into the air. Her voice spread out, warning the adventurers to move away from the cloud.

Shortly after the announcement began repeating on a loop, a vast force of elemental wind appeared to everyone’s senses, high in the sky. A massive vortex had formed and was drawing in the cloud, sucking it high into the sky. The adventurers who had been moving away from the cloud started moving faster, but a few were still sucked up with the cloud. Allayeth tilted her head back, sighing as she looked at the vortex, barely visibly beyond the chaotically swirling cloud.

“He could have waited a little bit,” she said. “No patience, that man.”

“Out of curiosity,” Jason asked, “how would you have warned everyone if you didn't have my sound projector?”

“I wouldn't.”

“Okay,” Jason said. “And now I know you a little better.”

“Are you suggesting that I'm callous?”

“Definitely not,” Jason said firmly.

“Good.”

“Because I don't want to get sucked into a wind vortex like the sound projector you borrowed,” he mumbled.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.”

“It didn't sound like nothing.”

“Oh look: there's a gold-ranker flying over here. He probably needs to talk to you about something very important.”

Chapter 721

Explicitly Antagonistic

Jason and his team were not the only ones to capture some of the elemental messengers, although they were the ones to catch the most. Clive and Farrah's ritual cages were able to contain almost fifty of them, although the constructs would not last forever. The Adventure Society was sending containment vehicles in their direction, but in the meantime, all of the prisoners were being watched.

The cloud that had been choking the sky was now gone. The diamond-ranker, Charist, had created an air vortex that sucked up not just the cloud and the messengers inside it but a goodly number of the adventurers fighting those messengers. All of them were tossed into the upper atmosphere by Charist's potent vortex power.

On the ground, there was no shortage of adventurers, including those that had been tumbled around like clothes in a washing machine. Most of those had an unpleasant time being knocked around by the vortex, but through slow-fall or flight powers were able to return to the ground safely. The messengers had a less pleasant time of it as Charist killed most of them.

The absence of the cloud revealed a massive shaft descending into the earth, wide enough that a house could be dropped down it. The opening of the shaft was at the bottom of a hole made not by impact from above but explosion from below, making it less a crater than a massive exit wound.

Charist and Allayeth were discussing how he had approached the situation inside a privacy screen that both sealed off any sound and blurred the visuals just enough that no one could read their lips. Their body language remained obvious, however. Charist looked like a child caught doing something stupid by his mother as Allayeth jabbed her finger in his direction with every point she made. After talking about all the adventurers he had knocked around, she moved on to the messengers from the cloud that he hadn't killed.

"What inspired you to think that throwing them into space was a good idea?" Allayeth asked. "They can handle the cold, they don't need to breathe and they can fly. They're just going to come back."

"Then we'll kill them when they do."

"No, *you'll* go and find them now before they start showing up in little towns and villages across half the planet and killing everyone there."

"Find them? Do you know how big space is?"

"Unless you threw them to the moon, I don't see... you threw them to the moon?"

“Just a couple,” Charist mumbled. “You know I threw them because I was prioritising rescuing the adventurers.”

“Rescuing them from what?”

“From my air vortex.”

“You couldn’t have waited a little longer before using it?”

“How was I meant to know you were going to warn them all? It was something of an urgent situation, Ali.”

“Don’t ‘Ali’ me, Charist.”

“Fine. But you shouldn’t talk to me like this in front of the other adventurers.”

“They can’t hear us.”

“They can see me getting told off.”

“You won’t get told off if you don’t throw people to the moon!”

“We both know that isn’t true. Also, it was more *at* the moon than *to* the moon. It looks large, but hard to pinpoint from this distance.”

“At least tell me you didn’t throw them at the Mystic Moon.”

“No, it was the regular moon. Which is a point of reference, at least. Do you know how hard it will be to track people down if they’re randomly orbiting the planet?”

“Yes, Charist, I do. It’s the reason I don’t throw people into space. Much.”

“I don’t see why you are so up in arms about this.”

“Because it’s always the same with you, Charist. You drop in like an alchemy bomb and then leave me to clean up the mess. You insisted on taking the lead in dealing with Jason and you messed that right up. I had to step in and now everything is more complicated.”

“You cleaned up my mess, did you? You got no more answers out of Asano than I did. Do you even see what he’s doing right now?”

“Yes, Charist, I see it.”

“And you called him Jason.”

“That’s his name, Charist.”

“Are you sure you aren’t a little closer to Asano than you should be?”

“Charist, you are very powerful. When that’s what we need, that’s good, unless you start throwing messengers at the moon.”

“We don’t even know if any of them got there. It takes a lot of precision.”

“And you are a blunt object. You agreed to let me deal with J... Asano.”

“We shouldn’t have to deal with him. He’s a silver-ranker.”

“He’s more than just a silver-ranker, Charist, and I think you understand that.”

Charist peered at Allayeth in suspicion.

“You’ve had some success after all, haven’t you?” he accused. “When did you intend to share what you’ve learned with me?”

“Once I have something worth sharing. Asano has given me hints and implications, and little else. He’s wary, as you might expect after you essentially ransacked his home.”

“The man has too many secrets.”

“And you don’t?”

“No, Allayeth, I don’t. I’m not you. Are you sure you aren’t keeping things from me? Because I’m a ‘blunt instrument?’”

“Charist, you have no concept of how many things I’m keeping from you. Now, go chase down those messengers you threw. Why exactly did you not just kill them with the others? And don’t give that nonsense about saving adventurers because most saved themselves and you can kill a silver-ranker just as easily as throw one.”

“It’s fun tossing things into space.”

“That’s true,” Allayeth acknowledged. “But you need to make sure you’re throwing the right people. The one’s who’ll die.”

She pointed at the sky.

“Now go.”

“I don’t want to go to space,” he mumbled, earning him a raised eyebrow glare from Allayeth.

“Fine,” he grumbled, and then shot into the air with a rush of wind that sent up dust, dirt and debris for more than a hundred metres.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Allayeth said quietly after dropping the privacy screen. “I know you can still hear me, Charist.”

She turned to look at the ritual cages, their glowing golden light drawing attention. She moved in a blur to appear next to Jason.

“Don’t think I haven’t been watching what you’re up to,” she told him.

“What?” he asked innocently. “There are lots of adventurers watching the cages, not just me or even my team. Tell her, Korinne.”

Korinne bowed deeply.

“It is an honour to be in your presence, Lady Allayeth.”

“Well, that’s not helpful,” Jason complained.

“Jason,” Allayeth said, pointing at a portal arch. “What is that?”

“It’s a portal,” Jason said innocently.

“That would be one of your mysterious portals to places unknown.”

“It’s known to me. Kind of. I more or less understand the... anyway, what does that matter? It’s a perfectly innocent portal.”

“You weren’t trying to get some of the elemental messengers to go through it, then?”

“Maybe,” he said evasively. “What’s wrong with that?”

“The Adventure Society will be taking them into custody.”

“We caught them. It’s our cage. We’ve already got them in custody.”

“You aren’t isolated underground this time, Jason. You’re surrounded by adventurers. Powerful adventurers.”

“If you’re going to be making threats, Lady Allayeth, then I think you’d best start calling me Mr Asano.”

A gold-ranker approached in a blur of speed.

“You don’t talk to her like that,” the gold-ranker said.

“And you don’t bully our team like that,” Clive said, stepping up behind Jason along with the rest of their companions. “If these messengers belong to you, you’re welcome to them.”

Clive snapped his fingers and the cages vanished, leaving four dozen messengers amongst the adventurers. Jason’s group rushed through the portal arch, aside from Jason himself. He watched as Allayeth conjured a whip in each hand, each whip having nine thick lashes that ended in a serpentine head. They looked very much like a hydra whip that Jason had used at bronze rank.

Compared to Jason’s old whip, Allayeth’s conjured ones were vastly more powerful, as expected of a diamond-ranker. The heads dove down again and again as if bobbing for apples. With each bite, a silver-rank messenger died. The other adventurers contributed little more than containing the messengers as the whips did their grisly work, although some of the gold-rank adventurers contributed damage effectively.

After watching for a moment, Jason followed his companions through the portal. A gold-ranker moved to stop him but was brought up short by a spike of aura from Jason, who took the chance to slip into the portal. In his wake, the gold-ranker had the angry expression of a man who had just been startled by a moth and was angry at the embarrassment.

Jason appeared in his soul realm in one of the courtyards surrounding the central pagoda. In the constantly changing world of Jason’s astral kingdom, the courtyards currently had slate tile floors and were divided up by trellises covered in brightly flowering vines. The team were sitting at a large round table in plush cloud furniture

Jason joined them, tapping into the raw magic that he could shape into spirit coins as he did. Instead of turning the magic into coins, he had it take the form of trays full of refreshments and the team immediately started digging in.

“Bro, that was a total boss move,” Taika told Clive.

“It did feel satisfying,” Neil agreed, “but I can’t help but wonder about the repercussions.”

“I can’t say I approve of releasing all those messengers,” Humphrey said. “I know Lady Allayeth will handle them, but it still doesn’t feel right.”

“It felt right to me,” Clive said. “Jason isn’t the only one who doesn’t like getting pushed around. We devised those cages, we filled them with messengers and then they want to swoop in and what? Hand them all over to the Magic Society for study? No.”

“Am I the only one here that respects authority?” Humphrey complained.

His chair was a loveseat he shared with Sophie. She sidled next to him, taking his hand and intertwining their fingers.

“Of course you are,” she said sweetly. “I was a thief, Lindy was a thief. She still is, more often than she strictly should be. Taika is some kind of criminal, I’m not clear on the details. Clive is definitely done after the way he was treated by the Magic Society, and I certainly don’t have to explain Jason.”

“I don’t think you could,” Neil said.

“I don’t have a problem with authority,” Rufus said. “Hierarchy is important in the management of institutions.”

“I’m ambivalent,” Neil said. “I could go either way, based on the circumstances. Which we should all be able to agree is the smart approach.”

“Well, you’ve got Rufus,” Sophie said, squeezing Humphrey’s hand. “That’s something, at least.”

“We’ve provoked the local authorities again,” Rufus said. “That leaves the question of what to do next. Are we going to investigate this giant hole with elemental messengers geysering out?”

“Absolutely not,” Humphrey said. “Presumably these messengers have dug their way out. We have no real idea what’s down there; all our information comes from sources that are unreliable or explicitly antagonistic.”

“Agreed,” Clive said. “I don’t trust some half-cooked Magic Society assumptions based on a handful of sketchy aura readings.”

“Or the Voice of the Will,” Jason added.

“Anything we do here, we do with our eyes open,” Humphrey said. “Between Clive and Jason—”

“Mostly Jason,” Neil interjected.

“Between Clive and Jason,” Humphrey repeated, giving Neil a sharp look, “we’ve demonstrated that we aren’t going to be pushed around. That means we can’t go back to playing good, obedient adventurers—”

“Which we’re terrible at anyway,” Belinda said.

“Could people stop interrupting me? We can’t—”

“Yeah, stop interrupting Humphrey,” Jason said. “He’s trying to monologue through what we’re... oh I did it too, didn’t I? Sorry Hump.”

Humphrey didn’t resume talking right away, panning a disgruntled gaze over the table. He saw the rest of the group trying not to laugh and turned around. Behind his chair, His moustachioed twin was also panning his gaze over the group, but with comically exaggerated sternness.

“Yeah,” Stash said in a gravelly imitation of Humphrey’s voice. “I’m a very serious man who relies on my friends to provide my own familiar with biscuits.”

“Stash, we’ve talked about this,” Humphrey said. “Biscuits are a sometimes food.”

“I’m a dragon! I’m not going to get fat!”

“It’s not about getting fat. It’s about self-discipline.”

“You never let me do anything I want!” Stash yelled and ran off. Humphrey watched him go with a sigh.

“I think he’s heading into the dragon equivalent of being a teenager,” Humphrey explained. “The accelerated maturing of a bonded familiar means we got to this point early, but at least it shouldn’t last too long.”

“Are you sure?” Rufus asked.

“Being a bonded familiar accelerates the maturation cycle of long-lived bonded familiar beasts,” Humphrey said. “It’s why creatures like dragons allow their young to bond.”

“Yes, I know that part,” Rufus said. “But Stash will slowly develop as you go through silver-rank, right? Which should take you about as long as a human goes through the juvenile stage. What you’ve got there, Humphrey, is a normal teenage boy. Who can shape-shift.”

Humphrey leaned back in his chair, looking shell-shocked at Rufus’ revelation. Sophie comfortingly patted his hand.

Chapter 722

Leap of Faith

Jason and his companions were sitting at a large round table, nibbling at refreshments.

“There’s no escaping the fact that Clive’s actions will cause us trouble,” Humphrey said. “That being said, we are under no obligation to hand over the fruits of our labour to the Adventure Society just because they assume they can take them. But it does complicate our interactions with them when we’re meant to be part of a major expedition soon. One with significant political ramifications.”

“Will that even be going forward now?” Neil asked. “We were working with the messengers because they’re sitting on the hole leading down to the natural array, but it looks like these messed-up new messengers just dug an extra hole for us.”

“If the Adventure Society wants to try and go around the messengers,” Clive said, “I strongly suggest we stay out of it. As much as I detest working with this Jes Fin Kaal woman, she’s not wrong about our knowledge of natural arrays being lacking. I know that I’m somewhat biased when it comes to the Magic Society, but their best researchers know less about natural arrays than Farrah does.”

“You think it’s better to trust this device the messengers are providing?” Belinda asked.

“It’s not a good choice,” Clive said, “but yes. We can at least examine that device and learn what we can from it while it’s still up here on the surface. That’s preferable to heading underground and trying to invent the field of natural array theory while neck-deep in whatever bizarre magic has been cooked up between the array itself and whatever the messengers did to it. All while dodging whatever elementally-tainted messengers are left, the local residents, whatever has happened to them, and an astral space full of leftover Builder cultists.”

“I’m halfway tempted to give it a go,” Farrah said. “I’m an array specialist, and I spent years studying the grid on Earth. I even led the project to repair it after some idiots sabotaged it. That grid is the endgame for natural array research. It uses the principles of natural arrays to create an artificial array according to an entirely different paradigm, using the natural landscape of the planet to create an array so large it boggles the mind, yet doesn’t interfere with any other arrays set up in that massive area. It’s at a level of sophistication that goes through complexity and back to simplicity. The elegance of it is like no magic I’ve ever encountered. These are the building blocks of what Travis and I are

doing in terms of building a communication system. Right now we're building towers and using crude magical resonance, but give us ten or twenty years and we'll be using mountains and oceans and no one will even notice. Thirty years, tops."

"So long as the Magic Society doesn't realise what you're working with and interrogate you for your knowledge," Clive pointed out.

"Which is why I've been quiet about this natural array business when I'm not exclusively around friends," Farrah said.

"Maybe you should return to adventuring," Jason said. "Come back to this research when you're diamond-rank and don't have to worry about that."

"It's what a lot of diamond-rankers do," Rufus said. "Look at that lady who builds cloud houses and has been chasing Jason around."

"No," Clive said, shaking his head. "That's the smart thing, yes, but that's not how it works. When you find something you need — and I mean *need* to research, you're not going to wait. Not to reach diamond, which is itself an extremely uncertain proposition. When that knowledge is waiting just out of reach, all you can do is take the step forward to reach it. Nothing else matters."

Farrah and Clive nodded a shared understanding.

"The grid on Earth is like the astral magic the messengers developed for the Builder cult. It's way beyond any local equivalent and was imported in. I suspect that it was the messengers who developed the magic that the person who built the grid on Earth used. That's what makes me suspect that the messengers aren't lying when they say they know what they're doing with this natural array."

"Do you think you understand this magic enough to figure out what to do with this natural array?" Humphrey asked Farrah. "Enough that you'd be willing to go down there without examining the device the messengers have promised us?"

"No," Farrah said without any hint of uncertainty. "I said I was halfway tempted, but that is the half that encourages Jason to do things. The other half is the part of me that tells him to not do things."

"We should listen to that half," Jason said. "Trust me on that one."

"I'll probably learn more from the messenger device than a messed-up natural array anyway," Farrah said. "But why not check out the device first and *then* the array? A little bit of patience and we get the best of both worlds. Well, best for my research. I've been to both worlds and fiddling with them magically has been fairly catastrophic, historically speaking."

“So, that’s a no to going down this new hole then,” Neil said. “Good, because not only is dropping down the big spooky hole something I don’t want to do, but it also sounds like a euphemism for something I don’t want to do.”

“Then we carry on as we were?” Rufus asked. “It seems a little anti-climactic to just go back to the contracts we were on.”

“Sounds good to me,” Jason said. “There will be no shortage of adventurers looking to be part of whatever the response to this giant hole ends up being. I say we leave them to it.”

Around the massive hole in the ground, dozens of adventurers and hundreds of adventure society functionaries were building an encampment that would beggar most towns. Flattened trees and underbrush were cleared away and magically recycled into building materials. Stone shapers smoothed out the ground and laid foundations.

Charist stormed into a large tent where Allayeth was in a folding camp chair, looking out.

“Have you seen what they’re doing out there?” he asked angrily.

“I have,” she said. Her gaze didn’t waver from the portal arch Jason and his team had vanished into. It still sat next to where Clive and Farrah’s ritual cages had been. She had been sitting as well, watching it through the open tent flap for the hours it took Charist to hunt down the orbital messengers.

“They’re out here building an outpost to go delving into the ground. How many of these people did they pull away from rebuilding the city for this? Look at how fast they’re going. Those could have been people’s homes.”

“They could,” Allayeth agreed.

“Do you know what the Adventure Society executives said when I asked?”

“The same thing they told me, I imagine.”

“That while diamond-rankers don’t answer to the society, neither does the society answer to them.”

“Yes. That’s what they told me as well.”

“What is happening lately? What happened to the respect people used to hold for us?”

“I’m not sure that was respect, Charist. It was power and mystery, and our prominence since the monster surge began has stripped much of that mystery away. We still have the power, yes, but it’s quantifiable for them now. They’ve seen us hit our limits

against Mah Go Schaat. And against Jason Asano, who turned out to be the limit for Mah Go Schaat.”

“Asano didn’t kill a diamond-rank messenger.”

“No. But a diamond-rank messenger tried to kill him and what happened? The messenger dropped dead and Asano ate his life force. When it comes to reputation, the story matters more than the details, and the stories about Jason are the stuff of legends, however accurate they may or may not be.”

Charist let out his frustration in a grumbling growl.

“I’m going to escort the messengers that were captured back to the city for proper containment at the Adventure Society campus.”

He strode back out, leaving Allayeth still contemplating the portal arch. The loosed messengers had been dealt with, but setting them loose had caused a rift between the Adventure Society and Jason’s team. Normally, annoying one team, even a prominent one, was of no matter to the society. Things always became complicated when such a team had leverage.

The expedition to the natural array was important to the Adventure Society. It meant saving Yareh instead of having to move the entire population and start over. Claiming the natural array would be a massive boon to the Magic Society, so the Adventure Society securing it would gain them a lot of influence with their sister organisation. The success of that expedition was largely contingent on Jason Asano, however, who was much less invested in it. That gave him an advantage over the Adventure Society that most adventurers didn’t have.

Their stunt of releasing dozens of enemies in the middle of a bunch of adventurers could only have been worse if it hadn’t been in the middle of a bunch of adventurers. Allayeth still wondered what Asano wanted them for, trying to take them through his mysterious portal. If releasing the messengers had produced casualties it would have been an untenable situation, and even with everything safely contained, the society wasn’t happy.

The director might have been an advocate for Jason in the past, but the other upper executives were done indulging him. Allayeth knew that they had reached out to the continental council to step in, which was not what Allayeth considered a good solution. The society executives wanted to ramp up the pressure on Jason’s team until they fell in line, but she was quite certain they would not, whatever pressure was brought to bear. All it would accomplish was driving Jason and his team to act with further independence.

Jason had threatened to surrender his Adventure Society membership and Allayeth wondered if that might not be best. If they would only ever use the society for their own needs and never serve its needs, then what was the point? That was the privilege of diamond-rankers, earned through service and power.

One of the issues that the Adventure Society had in reining in Jason was his activities for the society. The society's stated purpose was protecting the populace from monsters and other threats, and Jason's record of self-sacrifice for that very purpose was beyond reproach.

His team were respected. Celebrated, even. They had a record of taking the jobs others didn't want, be that in Greenstone, Rimaros or now in Yaresh. When they weren't doing the scutwork they were doing the exact opposite: fighting with the fate of thousands hanging in the balance. Their record made it all but impossible to reproach them for not acting in service of the society's political needs.

They had saved Greenstone from being invaded by the Builder's world engineers. Not only would the diamond-ranked constructs have annihilated the city and everyone in it but the Builder invasion would have come three years early. In Rimaros he convinced the immensely powerful Dawn to wipe out one of the Builder's fortress cities. Another was felled by a weapon designed by one of Jason's companions. Then his team was critical to breaking the Order of Redemption.

In Yaresh, they continued to hold a prominence that was outsized relative to their rank. They had been on the front lines of the world-taker worm discovery, and Jason's cloud palace had allowed them to set up a processing point for handling the refugees. It would have otherwise taken far longer to get the logistics into place.

Jason's ostentatious aura display in the Battle of Yaresh had sent the enemy into a frenzy, exposing them to a costly counterattack. He had captured a contingent of messengers, including an important commander, and the enemy diamond-ranker had fallen dead at his feet for reasons still unknown.

And now he was a critical element in the expedition underground because the messengers refused to deal with anyone else. Combined with Jason's increasingly obvious messenger-like tendencies, from floating around on his own aura to his general sense of smug superiority, it made people nervous. But those were people in power. By reputation, Jason Asano was unimpeachable, and that reputation was spreading now that he had abandoned his false persona. His name had literally resonated over the battlefield in the battle of Yaresh. The messengers had targeted him personally, and they had fallen extremely short.

The Adventure Society branch in Rimaros had understood the difficulty in handling them. Jason had even undergone a few theatrics to demonstrate he was still subject to society control, but his tolerance for such games had clearly come to an end.

As events currently stood, the Adventure Society needed Jason more than he needed them. He wasn't invested in saving Yaresh when there were real, practical reasons to just relocate the city. As one of the few people that could read his emotions, Allayeth knew his position on that to be his true opinion. He would rather relocate the whole city than work with the messengers but, at least in that, he has acceded to the Adventure Society.

Allayeth also knew that if the society kept pushing, Jason would be willing to reverse that decision, abandon his society membership and walk away, albeit with reluctance. Contracts and the information that came with them were convenient, but if he and his team wanted to go killing monsters freelance, they could. With two loot powers on the team, they could easily get by without the contract rewards.

Still staring at the portal, Allayeth let out a sigh. She knew that something had to change if Jason and the Adventure Society were going to stay connected, and that it was the best thing for both in the long run. The problem was that both needed to compromise when they both felt they had compromised enough.

If Jason walked away, it was likely the messengers would refuse to work with the 'servant races' at all and the natural array would inexorably destroy what remained of Yaresh. But once Jason no longer had that leverage over the Adventure Society, it would seek to redress the grievances it had previously put aside. That might come from the pride of gold-rankers or society executives, or it might be to shield the society's reputation so it didn't look like a silver-ranker was pushing it around.

Allayeth knew she had to be the adult in the room, take the squabbling children aside and force them to reluctantly shake hands, even as they sneered at one another. She had to be the glue that held them together, but she wasn't sure how to do that. The Adventure Society would back her because she wasn't some silver-ranker; when she or Charist treated them with the disregard that Jason did, that fell within their expectation. It was the privilege of power.

Was the solution to show them Jason's power? She was convinced that his rank was not a true reflection of his abilities, but how, why and what they were remained a mystery. Jason was beginning to trust her, but not enough to let her in. Who was the backer who gave him whatever vast power lay beyond that portal? Why was he convinced that the truth had at least a chance of making her want to kill him?

Her gaze had not left the portal in all the time she had been sitting in the tent. She stood up, eyes still locked on it.

“It’s going to take a leap of faith,” she murmured. She steeled herself for a moment and then strode over to the portal and stepped through.

Chapter 723

Garden-Variety Arrogance

Jason's team were preparing to leave his soul realm when Jason went dead still.

"Jason?" Gary asked, prompting everyone else to look at him.

"What's wrong?" Humphrey asked.

"Allayeth has been staring at the portal the whole time we've been in here. She just got up and walked through it."

The group all looked at the nearby portal arch.

"I opened another portal in the gardens," Jason said. "Stay here."

"Would you like us to..." Humphrey started only for Jason to vanish.

"...help with anything," he belatedly finished, then sighed.

"Is it a good thing that the god-like power here doesn't make him any more imperious?" Neil asked. "Or is it a bad thing that he isn't any less imperious when he's anywhere else?"

Dedicated portal specialists had power sets that synergised to expand the rank and number of people they could move with translocation powers. They supplemented this with specialised rituals and custom-crafted tools to further push those limits. But there was no combination of essence abilities or bespoke magic items that would stretch a silver-rank portal to accommodate a diamond-ranker.

This alone implied that it was not a portal of the normal variety to accept Allayeth, and likely not an essence ability at all. Even so, she hesitated for only the briefest moment in front of Jason's portal arch. The overwhelming power she could sense on the other side had given her pause, despite her determination, but she pushed through.

Transitioning through the portal felt slightly different from going through an ordinary portal. It was hard to tell the exact difference in sensation, and even a gold-ranker would have trouble noticing any difference. Allayeth's senses were able to pick up that the transition took the tiniest moment longer than it should have, and she felt a slight-but-definite shudder against her soul.

This led her to arrive with just a hint of trepidation. When the realm beyond the portal registered on her senses as she arrived, that trepidation was proven more than justified. The spiritual environment in which she found herself felt almost like an attack, an aura of raw power and terrible will as ubiquitous as the air. She screwed her eyes shut and

concentrated on rallying her spiritual strength. She struggled against the domineering power that demanded control, but fighting it was like trying to drink the ocean.

The sense of someone else controlling her fate was something Allayeth had spent her entire adventuring career, the vast majority of her life, trying to overcome. Now she was adrift in a sea of raw spiritual oppression faced with the inescapable fact that she was under someone's control.

Allayeth staggered as she flashed back to the childhood memory still seared into her mind. Slung over one of the house staff's shoulders, bouncing up and down as the woman ran. Her arms stretched out helplessly in the direction of her parent's bodies, vision blurring as her eyes filled with tears. That was the last time she had felt so completely helpless against the world around her. Nothing in her adventuring career, from iron to diamond, had ever left her feeling so at the mercy of fate.

"Here," Jason said softly and she found herself sitting in a chair with the impossible comfort of cloud furniture. The pressure was gone but she could sense the aura, waiting for her to challenge it again if she had the temerity.

The spiritual pressure being gone didn't allow her to relax but she realised her entire body was clenched, half curled up in the chair. She opened her eyes and found herself in a rainforest, in a clearing under a bright sky. After a moment she realised it was not natural rainforest but a garden expertly cultivated to feel like one.

The lush green foliage and gorgeously vibrant flowers were a little too perfectly arranged, and the space was too convenient for the passage of people. She was in a beautiful grove with a creek merrily babbling by, raw magic radiating off of it. She had no doubt that if she drank from it, it would be just as nourishing as a spirit coin. The trails leading away from the grove were flat and easy underfoot. One invited her along a wide, seemingly natural path, leading into a false twilight created by the canopy. Another meandered along the creek past tantalising fruit trees. That fruit, the tropical flowers and the rich greenery filled the air with an aroma that was almost musical.

But under the beauty was a sense of foreboding that she couldn't quite place the source of. She had a distinct feeling that danger lurked in the shadows for any who sought to explore beyond the well-defined paths. The garden was beautiful but also a threat; a benevolent cage that promised safety so long as she remained inside it.

The other notable aspect of her environment was an unsettled mutability, as if everything around her were on the verge of shifting. It felt like the zenith of the tide; still for the moment, but soon to inevitably change.

She wondered where Asano was, having definitely heard his voice as she had fallen into the chair. Wanting to confirm the danger her instincts warned her of, as well as find Jason, she pressed out her aura senses. The instant they reached beyond her body, they ran headlong into a wall of molasses. The world felt heavy, like the air on a summer day so humid that it was hard to breathe.

She reflected on the oddness of the comparison, given that she hadn't needed to breathe in well over a century. She wondered why her mind had thrown that up, then trembled as she realised. She didn't have any real memories of her childhood, bar the one that remained crystal clear. What was left was little more than a recollection of feelings, but her flashback had somehow managed to dredge something up.

She was holding her father's hand, licking flavoured ice on a scorching day. That was all she got, not when or where or why. Tears formed in her eyes, reflecting how deep that trauma had dug into her that her body would adapt to produce them.

She had to spiritually heave to spread her senses even a little way past her body. She closed her eyes again, concentrating entirely on extending her senses, and when she examined the aura more closely, it startled her. She had looked past the façade of Jason's surface aura before, but she had only brushed against the core before he sensed her intrusion and she backed off. That brief glimpse was identical to the aura around her. She opened her eyes to assess her physical surroundings again and found Jason standing in front of her.

He was wearing a floral shirt, tan shorts and sandals, topped with a broad-brimmed hat. In one hand he held a half-eaten sandwich and in the other, a glass of juice with a wedge of fruit pushed onto the edge. He was a few metres in front of her, standing on the grass with a concerned expression.

"It's you," she said, disbelief shaking her voice. "It's not some backer who we can't sense because you're imprinted on the portal. It's just you. All the things we attributed to... it's always just been you."

"Not always," he answered, his voice soft and his expression gentle. "I do have some remarkable acquaintances."

He gave her a smile unlike anything she had seen from him before. There was no trace of an underlying smirk, no ironic amusement. It was just kind.

"Are you alright?" he asked. "That seemed like an intense memory."

Her eyes turned sharp.

"You saw that?"

“No. Just the emotions that came with it. You blasted them out pretty hard, but I contained your aura so that no one else in this place sensed it.”

“This place,” she echoed. “This place is you. Not just the power but the physical space itself. Some kind of dimensional space, and I don’t think it’s an entirely stable one. Everything around me feels like it’s paused in the middle of some otherwise constant transformation. How is it so powerful? Why does your aura permeate it like water in a sponge.”

Her eyes went wide as she had a revelation.

“Are we inside your soul?”

“Yes.”

“How is that possible? How does that even work? Your body *is* your soul, like a messenger. If your body and soul are one thing, and we’re in your soul, where exactly are we in relation to that? Did we shrink and are in your body somehow? What part of your body? Do I even want to know?”

Jason let out an easygoing laugh.

“No, we’re not tiny people running around inside my eyeball or something. As you say, my body and soul are one, both physical and spiritual aspects. That means the spiritual elements intrude on the physical realm, granting me certain abilities. It’s why my spiritual expression — my aura — can manifest as a physical force. The messengers are the same. Where we are now is the opposite end: a physical intrusion into the spiritual realm that is the astral. It’s something akin to an astral space, but instead of being anchored to the world, it’s anchored to me.”

“Do all the messengers have one of these spaces as well?”

“No,” Jason said. “They have the potential for them, but the space does not manifest until they become an astral king.”

“And that’s why they say you are a king. Because you can do what their kings do.”

“Yes.”

“It’s unstable.”

“Embryonic would be a more accurate description. I’m still new to this and this space has grown faster than my ability to manage it. I don’t have all the tools to make things settled yet.”

“The tools?”

“Yes. I need something called a soul forge. There may be a way to obtain one from the natural array, or perhaps turn it into one. I suspect that is the true objective of the messengers, and likely what the device they intend to give us will do. It’s also the main

reason I'm quite certain they intend for me to die down there. They need me to get it, but they can't allow me to keep it."

"I think they intend everyone to die down there."

"I imagine you're right."

"But what makes you think that this soul forge is what's down there?"

"Something that Healer gave me."

"Healer, as in the god?"

"It would be weird if it was Healer the pre-loved amphora salesman."

"A god gave you a gift?"

"Don't be envious. Gods and great astral beings don't give you gifts; they give you manipulation with a sweet candy shell. You take it, because they don't muck about when handing out the goods, but get ready to drop neck-deep in the brown. Nothing is just a gift with them."

Jason took out a fist-sized orb that glowed with gold, silver and blue transcendent light. A window popped up in front of Allayeth, startling her.

Item: [Genesis Command: Life] (transcendent rank, legendary)

The authority to create a life. (consumable, magic core).

- Effect: Give true life to an astral construct created from a dimensional space. The construct becomes a true astral entity, bound to the dimensional space.
- Uses remaining: 1/1
- You do not meet the qualifications to activate this device in the current space. Missing element: soul forge.

"What is this?" Allayeth asked, the screen blurring as she passed a hand through it.

"This is how I see the world," Jason told her. "Mostly."

"Mostly?"

"There are other elements."

Synthesizer music started playing and a black and white helicopter flew overhead.

"Sorry," Jason apologised as the music abruptly stopped. "I'm still learning to control this place properly and I occasionally get some reflexive Airwolf."

"I don't know what that means."

"It means that if you see David Hasselhoff wandering around, just let him go."

"I don't know who that is."

"You'll catch up. Have you ever heard of a DVD box set?"

Allayeth stopped asking questions that only led to nonsensical answers and turned back to the message window still floating in the air.

“This is a description of the item the Healer gave you?” she asked, her eyes moving to the orb still in Jason’s hand.

“Yes. You’ll see the last line mentions that I’m missing something in order to use it.”

“A soul forge.”

“A suspicious man might look at something that he got from a god with a critical missing component and imagine it to be a clue as to what he might encounter in the near future.”

Allayeth frowned, still overwhelmed by everything. The power of the place. The man behind that power, who had received enough gifts from gods and great astral beings to share the benefits of his experience.

“How did you get this power?”

“Which power? You’ll have to narrow it down.”

“To create this space inside your soul.”

“It just kind of happened. I tend to get powerful new abilities when I die. The second time I died was when I first gained the ability that would ultimately become this place. It really came together after the fourth time I died, but that was just coincidental timing. It was already in motion before Shako killed me.”

“The Builder’s vessel?”

“He was at the time, yeah. They gave him the boot for breaking the rules when he tried to kill me again.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“I know, right?”

“Are you going to keep hiding things from me at this stage? I’m inside your soul.”

“Yes, I am. And yes, you are. Walk with me.”

She stood and fell into step with Jason as they wandered along a gravel path that followed the creek. Just as she was about to press him with more questions, she spotted a messenger flying off in the distance.

“You let the messengers here roam free.”

“Everyone here is as free as I allow them to be.”

“Meaning that no one is free at all,” she said. “Except you.”

“I’m not sure even me.”

“This is your soul.”

“Yes, but obligations are chains in and of themselves. If my behaviour out there changes who I am, it changes things in here as well. If your soul crumbles, Allayeth, it's a metaphor. For me, it's literal, and I don't know what this place becomes in the aftermath of that.”

“You were right to be wary of showing us this. Charist would kill you as soon as he got out. Never let him know about this until you have the strength to stop him. Or do you have it already? Did you use the power of this place to kill the diamond-rank messenger?”

“No. I still have no idea what happened there. I can tap into the power of this place while I'm out there, but it's never easy and there's always a price.”

“Then tell no one.”

“You may have noticed, lady, but that's what I was doing. You're the one who barged in here.”

“At your standing invitation.”

“You weren't meant to accept it.”

“And if Charist does as well?”

“Then he stays here until I'm strong enough that he can't kill me.”

“Disappearing a diamond-ranker would be a mess I don't think you're ready for.”

“That's why I'd appreciate you keeping him out.”

“And what makes you think you can trust me?”

“I'm working on that.”

His face took on a sad smile.

“I like trusting people,” he told her. “It used to be that I would always trust people until they gave me a reason not to. The cost of making a mistake is too high for that now. There is so much riding on me that I can't risk that kind of mistake just because it might help me make a new friend. I have to be careful these days.”

Allayeth nodded, understanding the burden of power and responsibility. She looked away from him, her eyes once more taking in the beautiful gardens around them.

“This is why you act like you're already a diamond-ranker isn't it? You're just waiting for your rank to catch up to the rest of you. The power you have here, your spiritual strength. The circles you move in and the challenges in front of you. The gods and the great astral beings understand, but we mere mortals don't see it. How many of your problems stem from exactly that?”

“Most of them. Fortunately, it's rarely the problems that involve killing things.”

“I see why you act the way you do now. I think I would too.”

“No,” Jason said, shaking his head. “I was already like this before I acquired all this power. It’s just ordinary, garden-variety arrogance.”

Chapter 724

How to Reach Gold-Rank in Three Easy Steps

Jason and Allayeth continued to meander through the garden of Jason's spiritual estate.

"This realm is in a constant state of change," Jason explained. "At first, it was a metaphor. A mindscape I could enter while meditating. I found it after my first direct encounter with the Builder — I'm assuming you've read my Adventure Society records."

"Yes, although they left me with more questions than answers."

"Perhaps you'll get some of them. Some day. As I said, it was a mindscape, shaped fairly directly by my essences. After I died the second time I was able to enter the space, just myself and my familiars. Then... other things happened. From there, it became a genuine space, as you see. It also became less rigidly defined by my essences. Their influence didn't vanish, it just blended together with other factors. I suspect it's related to how I view them and how that relates to my sense of self."

"It is," Allayeth said.

"That was a confident response. You have a lot of experience with dimensional soul realms?"

"No, but I understand how we, meaning all essence users, relate to our essences. Are you familiar with the idea that essences shape who we are?"

"I am. When I first arrived in this world, I met two people with different views on this. One thought that the essences we choose shape us, so she wasn't delighted with my sin essence. Or my doom essence. Well, she didn't care for my essences at all, really. The other person, that's my friend Rufus, held that our essences are what we make of them."

"Neither was entirely right or wrong. At low rank, our essences are just tools. Things become more complicated at higher ranks, and attempting to engage with those higher truths too early can be detrimental to growth. It's why the Adventure and Magic Societies forbid sharing that information until it becomes relevant at high silver."

"I've heard pieces of this, from Rufus' mother and elsewhere. From what I can tell, we're talking about exploring essences and how they relate to who we are on a conceptual level."

"Yes. It seems somewhat absurd to not tell you, seeing this place. Starting around the peak of silver, the traditional method to advance stops being as effective. That's the balanced approach of training the body, training the spirit, and then pushing them both to the limit by fighting monsters. Advancement slows as you reach that point."

“At that point? Advancement feels quite slow now.”

“The wall is only the beginning. It gets slower unless you know what you're doing. This is where those without strong mentors tend to fall down because they lack guidance. That's not always true, though. Charist, for example, had no one to guide him but he moved quite smoothly from silver into gold. Some people just know exactly who and what they are. It's the complications that catch us up, so the process favours those who are...”

“Simple?”

“I was searching for a better word. Uncomplicated, perhaps.”

“That sounds worse. It makes it sound like you're calling them simple and think they're too simple to figure that out.”

“You may be right. In any case, they have an advantage over those who overthink things in coming to terms with their essences. It's not that essences alter our identities, not directly. What they do is find parts of our identities and latch onto them. They feed those parts of ourselves, fertilising and growing them until they are more prominent parts of us. You've noticed that essence users, especially high-rank ones, are often overt in their behaviours. Larger than life.”

“I've been a little guilty of that since I was an iron-ranker.”

“I'd wondered about that, reading your record. It's a good sign that your transition into and passage through gold-rank will be a straightforward one.”

“Are you calling me simple?”

“All I am doing is stating things that are true. Any conclusion you draw falls at your feet.”

Jason chuckled.

“Are you about to tell me how to reach gold-rank in three easy steps?” he asked her.

“Easy is relative. For example, the transition to gold-rank is the one time that being a core user beats out advancement through training.”

“Oh?”

“When you advance with monster cores, you can just throw money at the problem, buying cores until you hit gold.”

“I assume that is prohibitively expensive.”

“Oh, yes. There's a reason only royal families and the most established noble houses do it on a regular basis. It's often the last gasp of a house before it falls, in fact.”

“How so?”

“Most noble houses start with some exceptional adventurer. Someone with skills like yours but who doesn't run around causing trouble everywhere.”

Jason stopped short and Allayeth turned to look at him, seeing his expression turn hard.

“I don’t run around causing problems,” he said, his words clipped. “I run around solving them, and I’m getting pretty tired of people seeing it the wrong way around.”

Allayeth had been slowly acclimatising to Jason’s strange world with its domineering, ubiquitous aura. Suddenly she felt all over again just how small she and her power was in Jason’s realm.

“I’m not going to force you to pretend you think otherwise, Lady Allayeth, but if you can’t, I’ll thank you to go. I get enough of people telling me what I am out there; I have no obligation to allow it in here.”

A portal rose from the ground next to them. They looked at each other for a long time in silence.

“I’m sorry, Jason. You always seemed comfortable with your image. You certainly play into it enough.”

His stern expression morphed into a troubled frown.

“I’m sorry,” he apologised. “I hate people using their power to oppress me, yet I keep doing it to others at the drop of a hat. And you’re right in that the way I’ve conducted myself as an adventurer has understandably engendered certain impressions of me. I just wish that people would look past the way I do things and look at what those things are instead.”

“With respect, Jason, that is a desire shared by almost everyone ever.”

Jason blinked, then laughed, breaking the tension. Allayeth did not fail to notice that the world around them felt a little less oppressive.

“Come on,” he said, resuming their walk. “You were telling me about adventurers and noble houses.”

Allayeth took her place walking beside him, still following the creek. They had moved from the rainforest-style garden into a more cultivated area filled with roses. The flowers ranged from vibrant red to dark blue, with various shades of purple in between. The flowers all featured sharp, prominent thorns and their aroma was sweet but with a faint coppery tang.

She judged that this part of Jason’s realm was heavily influenced by his blood essence. She let her senses taste the affinities of the aura hanging heavy around her. It was sinister and hungry, but bursting with life and something else she had trouble placing. She examined it for a moment before realising that what she was sensing was immortality.

Her research into Jason confirmed that he had returned from the dead multiple times. It had also uncovered that the Builder himself had claimed that whatever power Jason used to resurrect had been expended, at least until he reached gold rank. What she was feeling now made her think that either the Builder was lying or the Builder was wrong.

"I've upset you," he said, seeing her caught up in contemplation.

"No," she told him. "This place leaves a lot to consider. About power and how much of it is tied up in essences. About you."

Jason nodded.

"I am increasingly drawn to the conclusion that essences are a veneer," he said. "The soul is the real power and essences are just tools to let us express that power. The fact that even gods and great astral beings are helpless to breach a resolute soul shows us that. I'm not sure that a soul has any limitations."

"You should advance to late silver as quickly as you can, Jason. I suspect that your passage into gold will be swift and smooth."

"Maybe I can beat the record," Jason said. "Dawn said she trained a woman who reached diamond-rank before she was forty. I don't think the Builder counts because he was a messenger."

Allayeth stopped dead.

"The Builder was a messenger?" she asked.

"You didn't know that? His name is Zithis Carrow Vayel. He was a sixteen-year-old diamond-ranker when the great astral beings recruited him to replace the old Builder."

"Where are you getting that information?"

"I move, from time to time, in rarefied circles. You know this."

"I know that gods come to speak with you, even though you aren't a priest. I know that you held a meeting with the Builder and the World-Phoenix and convinced the Builder to abandon his invasion early. I know that there were a lot of questions about the exact relationship between you and Hierophant Dawn."

"And yet, people can't stop messing with me," Jason said. "They see the people I deal with, and instead of backing away, they see my silver-rank and covet that which is mine."

"Are you truly surprised? Power is everything in Pallimustus, and you have more power than anyone realises. The hints of the power this realm represents are enough to drive people into a frenzy. You know this or you wouldn't have played the game of inviting Charist and myself to see it."

"Yes, well, you called my bluff and won that game."

“Did I? You could destroy me in an instant.”

“But will I?”

She glanced at Jason before looking away. Her aura senses told her more about him than her eyes did in this realm. She felt unconscionable power, a savage will perhaps too ready to face challenges to its authority. An iron fist, but one that was held open, shielding those underneath it. She was unsure if the aura of a benevolent tyrant was something to accept, run from or fight against. But that was a fight she did not ever want. There was an unflinching resolve that underlay all of it, like an infinite, invincible wall. Her instincts told her that this was the core of Jason Asano. This was how he stood strong in the face of gods and fought off the power of a great astral being.

“No,” she said. “I don't think you will. But I'm afraid of what happens when you change your mind.”

“Me too,” he admitted softly. “What happens when you leave this place? Are you going to sell me out to Charist?”

“If I said no, could you tell if I was lying?”

“Yes. But honestly? I could probably compel you to both speak and speak truthfully.”

“You would torture me?”

“No. I would rebuild your physiological makeup so that you were incapable of doing otherwise. Binaries are quite vulnerable in that regard, which is something Carlos Quildo is researching.”

“Binaries?”

“People whose souls and bodies are connected but still discrete entities.”

“So, almost everyone in existence.”

“Yes. I won't do that, by the way. I don't really know what I'm doing yet, and after I put you back together you would die the moment you left this place.”

“Why would you even tell me you can do that? Aren't you afraid it will lead me to kill you the moment I get out of here?”

“I hope you don't. I don't think that would be good for my diminishing ability to trust.”

The scent of the flowers filled her nostrils, reminding her of the power of immortality they held within them. She suddenly had the feeling that killing Jason Asano would be a very bad idea.

“Now,” he said, “we keep getting distracted. You were telling me about noble houses.”

“Right,” she said distractedly, reorienting her thoughts. “Noble houses. They are usually formed when an outstanding adventurer is given a title for some great service to

the local authorities. In the lifetime of that adventurer, they tend to flourish, but there comes a time when the adventurer is no longer around. When the founder dies or reaches diamond-rank and steps into the background, the family must make their own way like a baby bird leaving the nest. They have to fly on their own or hit the ground hard.”

“They need more successful adventurers to stay relevant.”

“That or several gold-rankers. Some families have amassed so much wealth that they can just pay their way to maintain a cadre of gold-rankers through cores. Adventurers are better though. They produce wealth instead of consuming it, and are more respected. But when a family is flagging, their coffers near empty and their highest rankers being silver, they sometimes throw all their remaining wealth into having at least one gold-ranker.”

“But one core-using gold-ranker won’t reverse their fortunes.”

“No,” Allayeth agreed. “Yet I have seen so many try anyway, desperately clinging to the fading remnants of long-dead glory.”

“How far can a core user go? We started talking about this because you said absorbing monster cores was an advantage for reaching gold rank.”

“Yes, because it doesn’t require that shift in approach from blindly fighting monsters to coming to grips with the complexities of self-revelation. But, once they reach gold-rank, they stop dead. Once you reach gold, cores will no longer let you circumvent the need for self-exploration. You can make some progress with cores, but there aren’t enough cores on the planet to get you to diamond.”

“What about diamond-rank cores?”

“I don’t know. If absorbing one didn’t kill you, then maybe. But there aren’t enough of those going around either, and I’ve only heard rumours of people checking. Not many would waste the power of diamond-rank monster core when you could use it to forge an artefact. That kind of magic item is worth many times some core-using gold-ranker.”

“So, core use is ultimately a dead end. That’s why the artefact Purity left behind is so important.”

“Yes. It could change the landscape of the world. But some core-users manage to advance effectively, namely craftspeople. Unlike adventurers, they push their limits by pushing the boundaries of their craft, instead of fighting monsters. Their sense of self-reflection often outstrips that of an adventurer because of their focus on their craft. That self-revelation allows them to extract viable amounts of advancement from cores, giving them a path to diamond. If anything, I would guess there are more craftsperson diamond-rankers than adventurers. Like the woman whose attention you have been fending off for the last few weeks. Did she make your cloud flask?”

“She did.”

“She’s interested in the unconventional modifications you’ve made?”

“She is.”

“What are you going to do about that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Perhaps I could join you when you finally meet with her.”

“I would appreciate that.”

She frowned.

“Did I just become one of the powerful people that always seem to be hanging around you?”

“I don’t think of them that way,” Jason said, “which is one of the reasons they choose to hang around.”

“Then what do you think of them as?”

“Friends.”

Chapter 725

Nigh-Impossible Goal

As Jason and Allayeth continued to meander through his garden estate, Allayeth had the chance to see much more of it. In the manicured gardens that didn't tower over them, she could see the looming pagoda at the centre of the estate. A network of small creeks flowed through everything, notable for the fact that they weren't filled with water but with unadulterated mana drawn from the astral.

"Have you considered opening a spirit coin farm here?" she asked.

"I have it on good authority that several gods like the economy where it is. I'm not above snubbing the gods, but not just because I can. Usually. And messing with the economy always ends up hurting the people at the bottom of it, while rich pricks like me make more money than ever."

"It would take a significant introduction of coins to affect an entire economy."

"I know, right?"

They paused halfway across a massive rope bridge that spanned over a sharp gorge. The walls of the gorge were covered in thick moss and creeper vines. The bottom was shrouded in spray from a river that emerged from a cave, barrelled along the bottom of the gorge and disappeared into another cave.

"The underground areas stem from my dark essence," Jason told her. "They have some spectacular glowing mushroom caverns."

They carried on, passing buildings that ranged from gleaming glass and metal to old mansions reclaimed by nature to the point that they were hard to spot amongst the overgrowth. Oddly, she saw Jason, time and again. Meditating, sparring with himself.

"Avatars?"

"Yeah. I can only make them like me in here. I can make avatars in my cloud palace too, but they're the creepy cyclops fellas you've already seen."

Along with duplicates of Jason, she saw messengers. Some flew in the sky while others were wandering around, floating over the ground or even standing on it. Solitary messengers looked introspective and conflicted, while those in groups conducted quiet conspiratorial chats.

"What are you doing with them?" Allayeth asked.

"Stopping you from doing things with them. They won't talk, whatever you put them through. But you know that because you've tried it with the ones captured during the Battle of Yaresh."

“And other conflicts, yes. But you could make them talk in this place, couldn’t you?”

“Yes. Silver-rankers I could make talk anywhere, I suspect. But that is a process I refuse to undertake unless the alternative is worse. Thus far, it’s only ever been the one time.”

“I’m not sure I follow your meaning.”

They were in a section of garden that looked like an abandoned English estate gone to seed, the once carefully manicured gardens having grown out unevenly. Buildings were half-crumbled and mostly overgrown. Jason nodded at a dilapidated farmhouse where a messenger was perched in a crouch on the rooftop, wings spread out to balance her. She had no eyes for Allayeth, staring death at Jason.

“That’s Tera,” Jason said. “She doesn’t like me very much.”

“She is your prisoner.”

“Being a prisoner she can accept. It’s being free that she struggles with.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Tera is a true believer in the messenger ideals. But she was going to die and I had to do things to keep her alive. Namely, I had to break her.”

“She doesn’t seem broken. Just angry.”

“Yes,” Jason said with a wide smile. “It worked out very well.”

“Most people with a messenger obsessed with their death wouldn’t call it working out well.”

“The first messenger who obsessed over my death was the Builder, so anyone else is a bit tame by comparison. But I will have someone else explain Tera’s situation and that of the other messengers. Do you know who Marek Nior Vargas is?”

“A messenger commander. A capable one. Also, the one you captured.”

Jason nodded.

“Marek,” he said. “Attend us please.”

Jason sat in a picnic chair that Allayeth was sure hadn’t been there a moment ago but she didn’t see appear. Failing to notice something happening that close to her was unsettling, and she was certain it was no accident. She checked behind herself and there was a chair for her too, plus a third when she looked forward again as she sat.

A messenger descended out of the sky, throwing a glance at the one Jason had called Tera. She continued to watch as Marek arrived, his wings folding back as he alighted upon the ground. Allayeth recognised Marek from having seen him across the battlefield while besieging messenger strongholds. He was less ostentatious in his appearance than most messengers, both in his garb and the way he carried himself.

He could have easily been a celestine adventurer with the wing essence if he was a foot shorter. He didn't stop at tucking his wings away but absorbed them fully into his body, something messengers could all do but rarely chose to. There was also something odd about the way he moved and it took Allayeth a moment to realise what it was.

Marek didn't make every move as if everything around him was his to command. Messengers believed themselves inherently superior and it was reflected in their body language. It was odd to see its absence, especially in front of Jason. It was one of many traits Jason shared with the messengers.

"You know each other," Jason said, certain but sounding surprised. She assumed he read that from their auras, something she was not used to. It had been years since someone else could read her emotions while theirs were closed off to her.

"We have met on the battlefield," Marek said.

"Marek, if you would be so kind, would you tell Lady Allayeth here how and why you came to be here?"

Marek looked at Jason.

"What should I hold back?"

"Nothing."

"Are you sure?"

"Lady Allayeth made a gesture of trust to come into this place. Diamond-rankers don't put themselves at the mercy of others very often. It's now my turn to put some trust in her."

"If you are sure," Marek said, his tone making it clear that he was not.

"I am," Jason told him.

"Very well," Marek said, then turned to look squarely at Allayeth. "The path that led me here started long ago, when I first became aware of a faction within the messengers called the Unorthodoxy..."

"What you're telling me," Allayeth said, "is that the messengers are an entire people made up of slaves who have been brainwashed into thinking they're lords."

"Yes," Marek confirmed.

Allayeth slumped back in her chair as she rubbed her temples in one hand, her mind churning away.

"That makes so much sense," she said. "It explains so much of the contradictory behaviour, the dissonance between their attitudes and their actions."

She looked up at Marek.

“I respect what you want to do for your people,” she said, “but there is little practical assistance I can offer you. The messengers are still invading our world, still killing our people. We are going to kill them right back.”

“And I respect that you have not asked me for information on the strategic disposition of my people,” Marek told her. “My gratitude for what Jason Asano has done is almost boundless, but not quite. He has given me the chance to free my people, but I will not let the price be making it easier for you to kill them. I will not sell out my own kind, even when they are victims without knowing it.”

“I understand. And when I said there was little I could do, I did mean little, not nothing. Here is what I propose: I attempt to sell the Adventure Society on Jason being given all messenger prisoners to contain.”

“I’m not going to go soul-torturing every messenger we encounter to try and turn them from the dark side,” Jason said. “Tera was an exception by circumstance, and don’t think I’m going to go challenging messengers to reproduce that circumstance.”

“I understand that. But from what Marek Nior Vargas just told me, you didn’t torture him. He wanted this, and convinced his people to go along with it. The ones who are still stuck in their indoctrination you can contain safely here, but there may be others you can help.”

“Not all of my people could bring themselves to open their souls to Jason,” Marek pointed out. “Even willingly, fighting past the self-preservation instinct to make yourself that vulnerable is not easy. You expose the most core parts of your being, and one of my people died trying and failing to do that. Because he couldn’t get there, the astral king was able to kill him because she still had a hold over his soul. Even here, he was not safe.”

“I understand that,” Allayeth said, “but they wouldn’t fare any better in Adventure Society custody. Any time one of our messenger prisoners shows any intention of talking to us, they die. And the ones who hold fast and give us nothing are ultimately executed once we’re convinced they are of no use to us. Here, they can be contained and maybe even turned around by messengers like you. And I imagine there are more like you, biding their time and hoping for an opportunity that they believe will never come.”

“There are,” Marek said.

“Someone should stay here when I let the rest of you go,” Jason said. “Convince any Unorthodoxy sympathisers to let me free them from astral king control.”

“Assuming you let us go at all,” Marek said. “You, yourself, have voiced continuing doubt on this point.”

“Honestly, that was more due diligence than anything,” Jason said. “I all but decided to let you go almost immediately. I’ve just been looking for reasons to change my mind. The problem is how to do that without having people like Allayeth here notice and take umbrage. Her senses are good enough, and she pays enough attention, that I can’t just let you loose. And if I go far enough away that she can’t sense me, someone else will. There are a lot of diamond-rankers that didn’t go back into seclusion after the monster surge because of you and yours. They’re always on the lookout for your kind, and if they sense me open up a portal and let a bunch of messengers out, they’ll take my head off and shake it to see what’s going on in there.”

“Yes, they will,” Allayeth agreed. “I can possibly talk the Adventure Society and the Yaresh government into allowing you to take in all the messengers, but that is no certainty. What is certain is that even I won’t convince them to have you let those messengers out again, including the ones you already have. We need an ally who is more compelling.”

“Who do you have in mind?” Jason asked.

“Liberty,” Allayeth told him.

“Just to be clear,” Marek asked, “are speaking of the goddess Liberty?”

“That’s a great idea,” Jason said. “I never even considered that.”

“That does not surprise me,” Allayeth said. “My research suggests that, despite trafficking with them more than anyone who does not serve them that I know of, you have an inherent distrust.”

“That’s fair to say,” Jason said. “I don’t trust religion, I don’t trust authority and I don’t trust anyone with more power than one person should have. Vast cosmic power falls quite thoroughly into that range.”

“You have vast cosmic power,” Allayeth pointed out.

“Yes,” Jason agreed.

“You don’t trust yourself?”

“No.”

“Yet you seek out even more power.”

“Yes.”

“How do you reconcile that with a lack of trust in yourself to use it responsibly?”

“I try to be patient and thoughtful in my actions. To consider my motives in making them, to see if the reasoning behind my ideals has been warped by my pride and vanity. Mostly, though, it is the same answer I gave to your earlier question: friends. A friend will support you when you are doing well and things are easy. A *good* friend holds you to account when you are in danger of losing yourself.”

His smile mixed sadness and happiness, his eyes holding a look of reminiscence.

“I’ve faced that danger more than once in the last few years. I’ve looked long into the abyss and crossed line after line until I don’t recognise the man who was pulled into a magical world he didn’t understand. Every time, my friends were there to help me find myself. Who I was after. And to stop me when I came to lines that were too far.”

He looked at Marek.

“Your kind are easy to hate, Marek Nior Vargas. You make it so easy to justify performing the most heinous acts upon you. I should thank you for that, in a way. It helped me, through my friends, realise that I was on a trajectory that had to change. That I had to stop escalating the violence and the terror or I would inevitably become the very thing I was fighting. I would have taken ownership of you instead of setting you free, convincing myself that it was justified. For a greater good. But, as my friend Humphrey tried to tell me long ago, we can’t always let our morals be relative. We have to choose for ourselves what our absolutes will be. Create our own objective anchor, and only then can we securely let ourselves ride the currents of circumstance, knowing that we won’t drift too far.”

“Mercy,” Marek said. “That is the anchor you have set for yourself. We have discussed this before.”

“Yes. Mercy won’t always be possible, but it’s what I want to pull myself back to after rough waters drag me away. But don’t forget about the power of friendship, either. It helps you secure that anchor. And this is something you should pay attention to. I’ve seen you with your companions here, and I know you feel friendship, but I also think you underestimate the power of it. Don’t. I used it to defeat the Builder. You’ve set yourself the nigh-impossible goal of liberating your people, and the power of friendship is how you do it. You and this kernel of people you love and trust have to become the seed that grows into a mighty tree.”

“I’m not sure how that works,” Marek said, his expression uncertain, and Jason broke out into laughter.

“I hate to break it to you, bloke, but that uncertainty is not going away. Take it from a guy who’s done the impossible enough times to know how it plays out; you’ll always be uncertain, every time.”

Jason turned back to Allayeth.

“Your idea is good. I’ll seek out the goddess Liberty.”

“Perhaps you should let me handle that, at least initially,” Allayeth said. “I know that she will love what you have done with Marek and his companions, but the first approach

should not be from someone whose idea of praying is 'oi, god, get down here before I get cranky.' They don't respond well to that."

"I've never said that. I don't think. Out loud."

Chapter 726

We Should Probably Get You Out of Here

"We need to talk with my team," Jason said to Allayeth. They were walking through an underground cavern lit by glowing fungus too bright and too convenient to be natural phosphorescence.

"Do they comprehend the magnitude of what this place means? Of what you are?"

"Their frame of reference is perhaps limited, for some of them. My mate Clive, maybe, and my friends that are priests probably understand the scope. Not many people have pushed their souls up against the will of a god or great astral being. Not in an actual conflict, which is when they show you the whole thing. Normally they just poke you as hard as you can take to make a point."

"Will," Allayeth said, focusing on the one word of Jason's. "The will as an element of the soul is not normally something essence users explore until gold-rank."

"Yeah, I've been learning about controlling aspects of the soul in isolation from Amos Pensinata. It's been really handy in expanding my perception without blasting my aura out like a beacon. We never focused on will because I already had a good teacher back at iron-rank."

"Farrah Hurin was your aura teacher at iron-rank. She shouldn't have had any grasp of will back then."

"I'm talking about someone else. From after Farrah died."

"I didn't see anything in your records. Are you talking about Carlos Quillido?"

"No. I'm talking about the Builder."

Allayeth flinched.

"You call it a teacher?"

"Him. He was a man once. A boy, really. I think he still is, in a lot of ways. It's almost like he's..."

Jason frowned as he trailed off.

"Like he's what?"

"It doesn't matter," Jason said, his tone firmly shelving the topic. "He was in the fullness of his power when he pressed his will upon mine and tried to get me to open the gates of my soul. He'd already claimed my body and then came for the rest. I didn't remember it for a long time, because he'd already claimed my brain at that stage. My soul remembered, sort of. Not exactly emotions but kind of. Only the things that impacted my will. Left a mark on my soul. I remember his will pushing against me when I had nothing

left but my own to push back with. He schooled me in the nature of will in the most thorough way possible."

"That is not teaching."

"Maybe not, but I still learned. How to turn my soul into a weapon. He carved that into the surface of my soul as he flayed it, trying to break my will. After that, soul attacks came so easily. Naturally. Like breathing, back when I had to do that."

"I can make soul attacks. It's something you can do after you learn to differentiate your will. It's meant to happen at gold or diamond, not iron-rank. It doesn't come easily either. It's hard to pinpoint your will so sharply, and there's an instinctive revulsion against doing that to another soul. You have to push through that to make a soul attack. I'm told it's possible to inure yourself to that but I have no interest in doing so."

"I never had that trouble," Jason said, his voice low. "Not the difficulty and not the revulsion."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring up such dark memories."

"It's fine. What Carlos Quilido and Arabelle Remore did do was put me back together again after. They built me back strong."

"You rely on the people around you a lot."

"You don't?"

"I don't have a lot of peers. Charist is an inconsistent comfort."

"Your team?"

"I was the only one to reach diamond. The others died or couldn't make it past gold. We weren't as remarkable as yours. I can see many of your team members reaching the peak."

"There is no peak."

"Essence users can't go beyond diamond-rank."

"Not with that attitude."

She looked at his teasing expression and couldn't help letting out a laugh.

"You really do just look at impossibility and put it on a to-do list don't you?" she asked, looking around at Jason's soul realm. They were entering a cenote, a sinkhole with water at the bottom and a hole leading to open sky at the top. A railed wooden deck ran around the circumference with two large grills and picnic seating. The light fell through the hole at just the right angle to illuminate the area perfectly.

"I have my moments," he said.

Allayeth was looking up through the hole when a glass sphere floated overhead. Inside it, a red mass pulsed with internal light, like a massive, glowing heart.

"What was that?" she asked.

"You know how Jen Fin Kaal is a Voice of the Will?"

"Yes."

"And you know that makes her an extension of her astral king's will?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm an astral king in progress. That's my Voice of the Will in progress."

"I think I'd rather deal with the messenger than that thing."

"I suspect that, once he comes out to play, so would the messengers."

Jason and Allayeth rejoined Jason's team in a courtyard lounge where the walls were covered in greenery and lotuses floated on a water feature of raw mana.

"But, to be clear," Humphrey said, "Lady Allayeth is the one who will go and talk to the goddess Liberty, correct?"

"To her high priestess in Yaresh," Allayeth said. "One does not just go speak to a goddess."

Jason's companions all turned to look at him, eyebrows raised.

"What?" he asked. "And really, who doesn't just talk to them? Isn't that what prayer is? Have I been getting prayer wrong this whole time? How does it work, then? Is it catered? Is that why people take all those casseroles to church functions?"

"Is he always like this?" Allayeth asked.

"No, but you don't want him the other way," Neil said and the rest of the group nodded their agreement.

"You know I'm right here?" Jason asked. "You should wait until I'm gone to talk me behind my back."

"Jason," Clive said. "You literally are this courtyard we're sitting in. You're the furniture we're sitting on. There is no behind your back."

Neil turned awkwardly on his picnic chair, twisting to look down at it with a concerned expression.

"I'm not always paying attention. I respect people's privacy."

"The goddess of Liberty might not be extremely open to you, Jason," Rufus pointed out.

"Something to do with the way you go around declaring things and then making everyone accept them whether they like it or not," Neil added, still looking uncertain if he should just be standing up.

"Dominion does seem to have taken quite a liking to you," Gary said. "He and Liberty don't like each other very much."

"He would definitely make the worst possible approach," Belinda said.

"Like trying to trap the goddess of Liberty maybe?" Sophie postulated.

"I totally know how he'd do it, bro. He'd get a box and he'd prop up one end of the box with a stick. There would be a string attached to the stick so he could pull it and drop the box, and the string would lead to where he was hiding inside a fake bush that he made. The bait he put under the box would be a sandwich and a little card with the word FREEDOM written on it."

"You think I would try to catch the goddess of Liberty in a box?" Jason asked.

"Yep."

"That tracks."

"Sounds like how it would go, yeah."

Jason ran a hand over his face.

"Why would I do that?" he asked.

"No idea."

"Doesn't seem to matter."

"We never know."

"At this point, we just watch and lay the occasional side bet," Neil said. "Speaking of which..."

The team started taking our spirit coins and handing them to Neil.

"Did you make some of kind of bet on me?" Jason asked.

"Nope," Neil transparently lied as he stashed away his winnings.

"There may have been a betting pool on how long it took you to find a new transcendent being to out-rank her now that you were dealing with diamond-rankers again," Humphrey said. "Belinda started it as soon as another diamond-ranker came in here and Neil picked 'immediately' as his time. Which wasn't fair, since we all—"

"I yelled it out first," Neil said. "You know the rules."

"You make bets like this enough that there are rules?" Allayeth asked.

"Yes," Belinda said. "And Humphrey has no room to complain because he picked the big battle in Yareh for the next time someone much stronger than Jason came to kill him, died, and then had something absurd looted from his body."

Allayeth blinked several times, her expression nonplussed.

"What kind of absurd thing?" she asked.

"He still hasn't told us, so he's not going to tell you," Sophie said. "He refuses to until he figures out how to use it."

"I think I need the soul forge," Jason said. "I'm pretty sure there's a... look, that doesn't matter. We need to concentrate on the next step. We're going to have some cranky officials waiting for us if we just wander back outside."

"Sorry about that," Clive said sheepishly.

"Hey," Jason said, putting a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Who amongst us hasn't defied authority or committed a bunch of crimes or rewritten city-sized chunks of reality in their own image?"

"What?" Allayeth asked.

"Humphrey, obviously," Jason continued. "But the rest of us have all done something shady. Maybe not Neil. You need to get out more, Neil. Get drunk and steal a land skimmer or something."

"You leave Neil alone," Humphrey said. "He's a respectable young man. Now, what solution do you have for the problem of what awaits us outside? I assume you have one."

"Maybe not a solution," Jason said. "But I can probably put off needing to deal with it immediately. Give Allayeth time to calm things down."

"I am meant to excuse the behaviour of your team, am I?"

"Yep," Jason said. "I'm pretty sure I can use the archway on the outside as an anchor point to open a portal inside the normal portal range. Meaning that I can probably portal myself back to the tree house and then open up the soul realm and out you all waltz."

He turned to Allayeth.

"Best if you scarper first," he said. "I don't want my portal arch to vanish and have them think I've absconded with a diamond-ranker."

"That's something else we need to discuss," Sophie said. "*Should* we abscond with a diamond-ranker? Are you sure you want to let her out with what she's seen?"

"We have to trust someone," Jason said.

"Do we though?" Belinda asked. "I mean, the Adventure Society seems to get in the way more than help us, you only have to ask Clive about the Magic Society and as for local government, you remember that guy you sent packing, Jason."

"What did you show him that sent him running?" Allayeth asked. "This whole place is certainly intimidating, and only more so the stronger your perception powers, I suspect. But not enough to make Lord Bynes the younger flee in a mad panic. I don't think."

"You remember that big door?" Jason asked. "The vault-looking one with the sign?"

“That sign was rather hard to forget,” Allayeth said. “The Astral Gate Containment Centre and Standish Family Adult Recreation Retrospective, was it? I’m assuming the astral gate part is what so disturbed Lord Bynes.”

“I wouldn’t rule the other bit just yet,” Belinda said. “What Clive’s parents were doing with those jellied eels is plenty disturbing itself.”

“Those are not real images,” Clive insisted.

“You haven’t even seen them,” Belinda said.

“Have you?” Clive asked in horror.

“No one has,” Humphrey said firmly. “Because they don’t exist. Jason is not going to create fake images of one of his friend’s parents doing obscene things. Are you, Jason?”

“No,” Jason begrudgingly admitted. “I recreated Clive’s mum’s voice a bit, but it’s mostly just squelching noises over some videos from my world that Farrah put on a recording crystal.”

“I need to get that crystal back, now you mention it,” Farrah said. “A girl has needs. Do you know what it’s like trying to get some action in Rimaros? Some gold-ranker got the fever over me but he’s about eighty and refuses to make a proper move until I’m at least half his age. No one else will go near me because they don’t want to offend him, though, but I’m not waiting quarter of a century for my next tumble. The equipment needs to be taken out and fired up from time to time or it’ll go rusty in the shed.”

“We need to put that aside,” Rufus said. “Very, very far aside, and concentrate on Sophie’s question of whether we should retain Lady Allayeth here rather than let her out with however many of Jason’s secrets she has managed to uncover. For my part, I am firmly against taking her prisoner. Prisoners taken in battle is one thing, but taking allies who know too much? I won’t be a party to that.”

“Jason said all that needed to be said,” Humphrey declared. “We need to trust someone. While I recognise your concerns, Belinda, regarding the various institutions that have sometimes — often, even — acted with less integrity than we would like. But I am willing to bet that the people who have gained power by turning from duty to politics in the name of power are in the minority. That minority tends to occupy the upper echelons of those institutions, it’s true, but even there I would wager that corruption is not ubiquitous.”

Humphrey stepped out and turned to face the group as a whole, Jason keeping his mouth closed and trying not to cheer at Humphrey for falling into a monologue.

“We have to trust,” Humphrey said. “We just have to. There are far too many problems in the world for the people in this room to solve them all. Yes, we’ve encountered our fair share of people who have surrendered their integrity. They see Clive’s mind or

Jason's... whatever it is with Jason, and they seek us out. They're opportunists, hungry and shameless. But I promise you that there are so many people out there doing the right thing just because it's the right thing. You don't see them because they aren't looking for glory or power. They're just looking to fulfil their duty."

He nodded to himself.

"Yes, they make mistakes. Anger, pride, vanity, greed; they lead us to make bad choices. But I have no doubt that most of the people in the Magic Society are just like Clive: trying to take magic and make the world a little bit better tomorrow than it is today. Do you think the people working in the Yareh government are all looking to fill their pockets and raise their status? Some, yes, but I promise you that most of them are trying their best to put the city back together again and help the people who live in it. And I hope I don't have to tell you about adventurers. They are unquestionably more susceptible to the pride and vanity I mentioned, but every person in this room has seen them step up and risk everything because it was their duty to do so. And a lot of them never made it back."

Humphrey moved to Belinda and put a hand on her shoulder.

"I know that you have less reason to trust than most," he told her. "But we have to, even when it doesn't work out the way we hoped. Because if we don't, then what's the point? I was reluctant when Jason brought along two thieves and said they were going to be adventurers. Now look at you: you're glorious. This is not the team I envisaged building when I was growing up, and you'd best believe that I envisaged it a lot. But now my team is better than I ever imagined because I was convinced to trust when the smart choice was not to. So, I'm going to keep making that choice. And if any of you want to make a different one out of fear or anger or bitterness, then I'm going to talk and talk and talk until you all change your minds. And, as I've just demonstrated, I certainly can do that—"

Sophie shoved Belinda out of the way, grabbed Humphrey by the lapels and dragged him into a passionate kiss as the others all looked on.

"Does anyone else feel like this undercuts the gravitas of Humphrey's big speech?" Neil asked.

"It was such a good monologue," Jason said proudly. "I would have put in some jokes, but I also would have whinged about how hard I have it with all my money and vast cosmic power, so it balances out."

Rufus moved next to Allayeth and leaned close.

"We should probably get you out of here," he said quietly.

Chapter 727

The Questions You're Asking Don't Matter

Allayeth went through the portal arch, leaving Jason's soul realm. Jason and his companions all looked at one another.

"Do you think she bought it?" Belinda asked.

"Bought what?" Humphrey asked.

Sophie patted him on the arm.

"Don't worry about it," she told him.

"Don't worry about what?"

"Belinda's question," Rufus said, "related to our 'plucky group of adventurers caught up in something crazy' routine. Essentially, whether she believed that we were a quirky group forced into challenges beyond us by circumstance."

"That was a routine?" Humphrey asked. "Why didn't anyone tell me?"

"Because your mind would be constantly churning over the idea that you're faking something," Jason said. "And we weren't faking. We were just playing up our natural proclivities a little."

"That doesn't explain why you wouldn't tell me."

"Humphrey," Jason said, "you're as much a liar as I am a modest and humble churchgoer. You're one of those people who, when told to act natural, turns into a robot."

"What's a robot?" Humphrey asked.

"Basically, an overcomplicated golem," Farrah said.

"Shouldn't she have been able to read our emotions anyway?" Humphrey asked.

"Not here," Jason said. "In this place, I can limit her senses. But she's got more life experience than all of us put together. I doubt she needs her perception powers to read our body language. We just played up our natural inclinations so they didn't come across as false. But Hump, you trying to act natural would have been a massive red flag."

"How she chooses to react to what she encountered here will play a big part in how things go for us from here," Rufus said. "If she supports us, things get a lot easier. The other diamond-ranker will stop pressuring Jason and the Adventure Society will be more accommodating. If she decides that Jason needs to be stopped before he becomes so powerful that's not an option, things get a lot harder."

"Do we think that's likely?" Gary asked.

"I wouldn't think so," Jason said. "While it is possible that she was fooling me, I picked up enough of her emotions to think that she's going to support us."

“She didn’t seem hostile,” Sophie said. “The opposite, if anything.”

“I think that I’ve accomplished something with her that I’ve failed to do many times in the past, to my cost,” Jason said.

“What’s that?” Rufus asked.

“Impart the magnitude of the powers and events he’s at the centre of,” Farrah said. “On Earth, the various factions only ever saw enough to covet. They never understood what he was doing or the price everyone would pay if they stopped him.”

“That was on me,” Jason said. “I never explained things properly. I was always angry or bitter. I never took the time to truly show people what I was doing or why. Sometimes that was necessary to avoid them trying to exploit me, but a lot of times I was just too burned out. Honestly, I’d reached a point where I didn’t feel the world deserved an explanation. It was my chance to be the bigger man, but my small-mindedness only made things worse.”

He looked over at the portal arch.

“I may be in danger of doing that again. I think I should sit down with the Adventure Society director, and some of the power players from Yareh. Explain it all from my perspective. Maybe then we can work together the way we should have from the start.”

Jason turned to look at Humphrey.

“It might be time to stop trying to do everything myself, and show a little trust.”

Allayeth emerged from Jason’s portal arch and it closed behind her, sinking into the ground without a trace. She surveyed the area and saw that the outpost the Adventure Society was building had developed at a startling pace. She was in an outskirt area used mostly for storage, now filled with massive wooden crates reinforced by metal.

She levitated into the air using her aura, a trick any silver-ranker could do. She contrasted it with what Jason and the messengers could do and it fell significantly short. Even at diamond rank, she could only affect herself and the levitation was still quite easy to disrupt. After seeing the inside of Jason’s soul realm, it made an apt metaphor for her own position.

She was powerful. One of the most powerful beings on the planet, but so much of what she found herself involved with was not from her planet. The Builder invasion, the messenger invasion. She was ostensibly at the end of her path to power and found herself poorly equipped to face it. Jason was far weaker, yet he was a part of that wider reality. Part of a cosmic community that she was not.

Those who were like her didn't see it. She and Charist had long ago become content to be large fish in a small pond, leaving Soramir Rimaros and his ilk to explore the realms beyond their world. She had put a box around her mind and was unable to clearly see anything outside that box. The Adventure Society was like her in this regard, their considerations limited by the constraints they unconsciously placed on themselves.

Seeing Jason Asano's soul from the inside had broken that box. Now she was able to see what Soramir Rimaros, Dawn and even the gods had seen from the beginning: Jason belonged to a wider world. For the first time in a long time, Allayeth found herself running into her limits and becoming dissatisfied with them.

Diamond rank was the end of the path. Not only was this an absolute that had been taught to her from the beginning, but the very idea of reaching it was a dream few adventurers could reach. When she did, she had been satisfied. She had no need to roam out into the cosmos, placing herself at the bottom of a new ladder she had no idea how to climb. She had achieved every goal she had ever set for herself, and it had always been enough.

But now, the cosmos she had declined to explore was intruding on her world, and in Jason Asano, she had caught a glimpse of how the climb might work. There was a man so far below her, yet also, so far above. He had a long way to go, but he would not so much as slow down at her level, let alone stop.

Allayeth looked at the outpost being built. The ragged hole that had been blasted outward was already covered in foundations that moved inward and down like a sunken theatre. Mostly it was prepared ground; sealed foundation waiting for buildings to be placed atop it. Some buildings were already in place, though, and Allayeth watched as more were formed in just minutes through magic.

She could see that this was not crude stone-shaping. The expert construction combined rituals, essence abilities and expert design knowledge. Charist was right to be angry that this level of industriousness had been pulled away from the reconstruction of the city.

The rapidly-forming outpost was an edifice to the opportunism of those with ambitions of power. They lacked the expansiveness of Allayeth's new perspective, seeing only the old squabbles. They didn't realise that power and the balance thereof had fundamentally changed. The Builder invasion had not been an isolated incident; it was an event that brought their world into a larger reality.

Although many of the people bustling about had seen her in the sky, they respected that her aura presence was undetectable, taking the hint and staying away. Only Charist

had the perception to notice her aura and had set off in her direction the moment he had. It took him only moments to arrive, and when he did, he moved to float in the air beside her.

“You went through Asano’s portal,” he said in lieu of a greeting.

“Yes.”

“Did you figure out how he could even produce a portal that you could use?”

“Yes.”

“Did you find out what power is backing him?”

“Yes.”

Charist rolled his eyes.

“Do you have any interest in giving an answer longer than one word?”

“The problem, Charist, is that the questions you’re asking don’t matter.”

“Then what does matter?”

“If Jason Asano and whatever he has going on is good for us or bad for us.”

“And?”

“It’s definitely bad for the messengers.”

“Tell me everything.”

“No.”

“No?”

“His secrets don’t hurt us.”

“And you expect me to take your word for that?”

“It will be a little hurtful if you don’t. But I understand how some unknown agent of unknown power could potentially compromise even a diamond-ranker, so we should make sure that hasn’t happened.”

“How? There’s no church of Purity to check if you’ve been affected by something.”

“The church of Liberty. They can tell you if my free will has been compromised.”

Charist nodded.

“Agreed,” he said. “Let’s return to Yaresh and we’ll head straight for the temple.”

Vidal Ladiv was not good at driving the flying skimmer he used to approach Jason’s cloud palace, currently a series of tree houses linked by rope bridges. Out on an open balcony, Travis Noble was working on a device the size of a transit van. It was a clear mix of magical and technological elements, most prominently a protruding shaft of metal. A cloud of gemstones floated around the shaft as if held in place by magnets.

Travis looked up at the approaching skimmer, watching curiously as it arrived unsteadily at the edge of the balcony. Vidal left it floating next to the rail and awkwardly hopped from the vehicle to the balcony.

"You don't seem great at that," Travis said. "No offence."

"Not at all," Vidal said. "I hate this thing. Back in Rimaros, my water powers were more than enough to get me around. But this far inland, there aren't enough waterways to get me where I need to go. Mr Asano moving to a treehouse in the middle of nowhere certainly doesn't help."

"Are you sure you should be driving that?" Travis asked. "It's a flying car and you get around in it like a nervous kid in driver's ed. It seems like there should be regulations or something against that. Aren't people worried you'll crash it into some lady's stroller and kill adorable twin girls?"

"That's oddly specific," Vidal said, looking at the massive device Travis was working on. "What's this?"

"Right now? Annoying. If I can solve the cyclical alignment issues, it'll be a rotary beam cannon."

"Some kind of weapon? I thought you were working on a communication device."

"It's more of a comprehensive communication grid. Also, that's work. This is more of a hobby."

Vidal looked over the monstrous and complex device.

"A hobby?"

"Yeah. Something to do for fun."

"You're building a weapon the size of a trade wagon for fun?"

"If you can't have some fun with a rotary beam cannon, I don't think you can have fun at all. What brings you here, Mr Ladv? Is it something to do with that giant explosion this morning? I saw the cloud getting sucked up into the air."

"Indirectly. Has Mr Asano returned yet?"

"Nope. Last I saw, they were all headed for the cloud. I don't even know what happened."

"Altered messengers broke out from deep underground."

"That was the explosion?"

"Yes."

"That seems weird. They dug all the way up to the surface and then made a big explosion for the last bit? Setting off something like that while underground with it is a terrible idea."

“The messengers were far from in their right minds.”

“I won't blame them for that. I'm building a giant Gatling laser in a tree house in alternate-universe Brazil. I'm not entirely convinced that *I'm* in my right mind. For all I know, I'm in an asylum somewhere staring into the distance and yelling 'pew pew pew' over and over.”

“Uh, alright. I need to talk to Asano.”

“They aren't back yet.”

“You don't seem worried about that.”

“Jason once got stuck with a bunch of his gold-rank enemies in a dimensional space that was on the verge of ripping a hole in the side of the universe and wiping out our planet. The one gold-ranker that manage to survive ran away and hid until Jason left that universe. As for the dimensional space, Jason turned it into a magic city that his clan lives in now. It kills anyone who tries to get near it with ill intentions, and it's kind of a temple to himself. And that was before he had his team with him so, no: I'm not worried that a bunch of second-rate angels with mental health issues will do them in.”

“I really need to get a look at Asano's unredacted Adventure Society record.”

“Oh, that was back in my universe. It won't be in there. Now that I think about it, I'm not sure I should be telling you this stuff.”

Travis looked at Vidal thoughtfully, then at the device he was working on.

“Can you go stand in front of that long metal bit?” Travis asked.

“No,” Vidal said.

Chapter 728

Political Price

On the balcony of Jason's treehouse, Vidal Ladiv was looking warily at the spherical device at the end of the pole he was holding.

"What exactly is this thing?" he asked.

"Don't worry about it," Travis said distractedly as he rummaged through a large box, absently tossing out crystals. "Just don't let it get too close to you. I've almost certainly resolved the organic proximity combustion issue, but better safe than sorry."

"What?"

Before Vidal could ask more questions, a portal arch appeared on the balcony. Jason and his companions emerged, with Farrah immediately looking at the spherical device.

"How did you resolve the organic proximity combustion issue?" she asked Travis.

"I put it on the end of a pole," he said.

"Oh," she said, and then turned to look at Vidal with a sympathetic grimace.

"Don't let it get too close to you," she suggested.

"Travis," Jason said, "take that thing off him. Vidal, I assume you're here because the Adventure Society has decided how to punish us because we wouldn't let them steal all our prisoners."

Travis waved a rod in the direction of an open door. A construct creature that looked like a naked store mannequin walked out and over to Vidal with a rocking shamble. The construct looked like it had been hastily assembled, possibly while drunk, from whatever parts came to hand. Vidal was fairly sure the left forearm was a short length of tree branch sloppily painted off-white.

"What's this for?" Vidal asked, clutching the very end of the pole to keep the device as far from himself as possible.

"Just hand it the thing," Travis said.

"You said this device was dangerous, and that construct does not look stable."

"It's fine," Travis said unconvincingly. "Hardly any explosives are left on it. After the incident."

"What incident?"

"I don't think he's allowed to tell you," Farrah said. "I don't remember the exact terms of the legal agreement, but the gag order lasted at least until the healers figured out how to stop... I shouldn't say any more."

"I don't think he's got any confidence in your construct, Travis," Neil said. "Can't you just take it yourself?"

"I'm not going near that thing," Travis said. "And you should be grateful I'm not. You're the one who would have to figure out how to get healing magic to work through the interference."

"What interference?" Neil asked.

"The magic on my nethers if there's another testicular resonance event."

"Another WHAT?" Vidal asked as he tossed the pole and the device it was attached to over the balcony.

"Hey!" Travis said. "I was joking; it's perfectly safe."

The device hit the ground and exploded. Everyone turned to look at Travis.

"Okay, 'perfectly' may have been a slight exaggeration," Travis conceded.

Humphrey went to the rail and looked over.

"I don't think it's going to start a forest fire," he said.

"Of course it won't," Travis said. "It's way too wet here for that. Probably. I might just pop down there and spray some stuff to make sure."

He ducked through the door the construct had emerged from and came out with a red canister.

"Blue," Farrah said.

Travis looked down at the canister made a wincing expression and went back inside, emerging with a blue canister instead.

"Dodged a bullet there," he said and made his way over to an elevating platform. Fitting in with the motif of the treehouse, the platform looked like it was being lowered on ropes.

"It's fine," Travis called up from below. "It's all fine. There are no problems down—"

One of the construct's arms popped off and went sailing over the rail with the thrum of a spring being violently unsprung.

"It's fine," Travis called up again. "On an unrelated note, Farrah could you wash down the construct from the green canister? Nothing dangerous is happening down here, but very very quickly would be ideal."

Everyone moved away from the construct that was now swaying on its feet.

"Isn't this the person who built the bomb that felled the Builder's flying city?" Vidal asked.

"Oh, yes," Farrah said as she went into the room, then came out with a third canister, this one green. "He's very good at making things that explode. Or shoot dangerous energy

more or less on command. Emit poisonous gas, often on purpose. Liquefy... oh, not allowed to talk about that one either. You know, Princess Liara knows a number of excellent legal advocates."

She used her Obsidian Wall power to put up a wall of dark stone between the group and the construct, now making a fizzing sound as it turned lopsidedly on the spot. With their vision of it blocked, they watched Farrah spray white liquid from the canister into the space they couldn't see behind the wall.

"I'm not doubting his ability to cause destruction," Vidal said. "My concerns are more about stability. The bomb that took down the fortress city, he presumably built that in the city where I was living at the time. Where my mum and hundreds of thousands of other people were living, right?"

"It was a fun project," Travis called out from below. "It was interesting to... why is this thing turning the plants that colour?"

"Is this something I should be allowing to happen in my building?" Jason asked.

"It's fine," Farrah said, moving to put the wall between herself and the construct as dark, thick smoke started to rise from it.

"Why is there a skull drawn on the side of that canister?" Belinda asked.

"No idea," Farrah said as a hole corroded through the wall. She raised another one in front of it.

"We might have used a few experimental materials on the construct," she confessed. "Just trying to find things that can hold more magic than usual without dangerous resonance."

"Some might say that trapping an escalating magical energy inside a fixed matrix with no release mechanism is dangerous..." Travis called out from below.

Everyone waited in silence for him to continue until finally, Jason spoke up.

"...but," he prompted.

"But what?" Travis called back. "Why did everyone go quiet?"

"We were kind of expecting you to follow up on that last thing you said," Jason told him.

"No, I was done."

"Should we move to a different tree house?" Sophie suggested and they all swiftly moved across a rope bridge to a different house built around another tree. Like all the treehouses that made up Jason's disguised cloud palace, it had a broad balcony. Jason called up a set of cloud-substance furniture for everyone that masked itself as wood to match the house. Despite the appearance, it retained the luxurious softness of cloud

material. They all took their seats which had Jason and his companions all facing the single chair left for Vidal.

“Should we wait for Travis?” Humphrey asked.

“No,” Travis called out. “Also, Farrah, could you bring me the yellow and purple canisters.”

“I thought you couldn’t get the yellow anymore after what happened to the bottling plant,” Farrah called back.

“He said I could take the surviving stock so long as I promised to never come back.”

“Just go,” Jason told her.

She wandered off and Jason turned to Vidal.

“So,” he said. “What has the Adventure Society decided to do about us?”

“To wait,” Vidal said. “There are opinions ranging from revoking your membership to demoting you all to one star. The director has spoken up for you, but he couldn’t override the entire executive council. The most he could manage was to refer it to the Continental Council. They will send an assessment officer to make a final judgement.”

“How long will that take?” Rufus asked.

“I have no idea,” Vidal said. “My guess would be a while, as this smacks of politics and the Continental Council really doesn’t like that. Honestly, I suspect that the executive council in Yaresh made sure it came across as political to slow down the process.”

“Why would they stall like that?” Sophie asked. “I assume it’s so they can bend us over somehow.”

“The expedition,” Jason said. “They need us for that. But they want us to toe the line, so they’re letting us know that there’s disciplinary action waiting for us afterwards. They hope that will put us on our best behaviour and make us more compliant.”

“They clearly haven’t been paying attention,” Belinda said. “We’re not exactly a compliant kind of team.”

“No team is,” Humphrey said. “Not any of the good ones, anyway. Adventurers have to be independent thinkers, able to take responsibility for their own choices.”

“Agreed,” Rufus said. “Any good Adventure Society branch respects that. It’s when politics get involved that it goes wrong. I might not think much of the way they train adventurers in Rimaros, but their Adventure Society strikes the right balance between directing adventurers and trusting them.”

“You look nervous, Vidal,” Jason said. “Unhappy.”

“I’m an Adventure Society official,” he said. “It doesn’t sound like you intend to make my life any easier.”

“Don’t forget what being an adventurer is about,” Rufus told him. “It’s not about the society and it’s not about us. It’s about helping people. Protecting people.”

“I don’t think you all being at odds with the Adventure Society will help a lot of people,” Vidal pointed out.

“And I think that excuses like that are how people who have corrupted the Adventure Society’s purpose get good adventurers to go along with bad intentions,” Rufus shot back. “All that accomplishes is getting people to stay quiet while the poison spreads.”

“Let’s not pile it all on Vidal, here,” Jason said. “He’s just the guy stuck in the middle, telling both sides things they don’t want to hear. That must suck. He’s not a local and is just as new to the political situation here as we are. Plus, he doesn’t have the same leverage we do to tell people to sod off.”

“Thank you,” Vidal said. “I had concerns about what I would be caught up in when the society assigned me to you as a liaison, but it has been more trying than anything I imagined. But I have a duty, and part of that duty is to give the society my best assessment of what you will do next.”

“For now,” Jason said, “we’re going to do what we were doing already: continue the contracts we signed up for.”

“Because it’s about the people who need help,” Rufus reiterated. “They don’t care about the politics. They only care about the monsters threatening their homes and families.”

“And we’re going to help them,” Humphrey said.

“Out of curiosity,” Rufus asked, “how resistant were the people calling for our heads to bringing in the Continental Council?”

“The Aristocratic Faction is a political bloc that crosses all major institutions in Yaresh,” Vidal explained. “They have members in any area prestigious enough and influence any place that isn’t. This is hardly unusual as aristocratic families hold a firm grip on most cities. There are other political factions, of course, but my experience has been that most places have only two main groups with any real influence. One is a conservative faction, usually led by aristocrats and others with wealth and power whose interests begin and end with maintaining the advantages they’ve built up over generations. The other group is also usually made up of aristocrats and people with power and money. This group believes in making changes and doing what’s right. They also believe that they are the only ones who know what’s right, so they make sure the changes are all either made by them or by those they control. Also, what’s right never seems to involve them giving up any of their money and power, oddly enough.”

"That sounds uncomfortably familiar," Jason muttered.

"And we come from another universe, bro."

"Those two power blocs, or some variation of them," Vidal said, "exist in every state and city-state that I have had dealings with as an Adventure Society official. Where those political blocs exert a significant influence on the Adventure Society, that is where they start to lose track of that mission Mr Remore was talking about."

Rufus nodded.

"I sorry, Mr Ladv," he said to Vidal. "It would seem that you have more passion and integrity than I have credited you for, and I apologise for that."

"Thank you, Mr Remore," Ladv said. "I have been far more involved with the Adventure Society here than any of you. I can tell you that while there is more political influence than I would like, the Yaresh branch is not as far gone as you might fear. The director, from what I can tell, is a good man. He manoeuvred the Aristocratic faction into calling on the Continental Council, not realising how inured they are to the influence of local political forces. Only the proper adventurers in their faction opposed it, knowing the reality, but the director's timing was deft. So, to answer your question, Mr Remore, the only people 'calling for your heads' who resisted calling in the Continental Council were the actual adventurers who understood what that entailed. Now that they have time to explain it to their fellows, they are trying to reverse that decision."

"Will they be able to do that?" Rufus asked.

"There are no guarantees," Vidal said, "but I suspect not. The Adventure Society director tricked the Aristocratic Faction into expending too much political capital. They pushed too hard for the executive council of the Adventure Society to go up against the director. They won't get them to go up against the director a second time to undo the thing they were influenced into doing in the first place."

"The Aristocratic faction members are nobility," Humphrey said. "Their rights are theirs by blood and can only be taken from them for transgressions on the level of treason. Any political setback for them is temporary."

Humphrey glanced at Jason before turning back to the group.

"The bureaucrats at the Adventure Society don't have the same security in their positions," he continued. "They will do what their political masters want, but only while it still benefits them. A nobleman can be seen taking wildly different positions from one day to the next because his family name will always place him on the upper echelon. Calcifer Bynes ran out of the large meeting we had all but wetting himself. He'll pay a political price

for that public humiliation but it doesn't change the fact that he is and always will be a man of wealth, influence and power."

"A good example," Vidal said. "Calcifer Bynes is part of the executive council, and while he'll fade into the background for a time, he's not going anywhere. But the bulk of the group are career bureaucrats. They have suckled at the teat of larger political forces, but when their careers are in danger, they will act in their own interests. This is why they will almost certainly not revoke the call for Continental Council intercession."

"That makes sense," Rufus said. "Calling in the council and then telling them to go home before they arrived would have severe political repercussions."

"What can we expect from this Continental Council?" Belinda asked.

"Last time I got involved with them," Jason said, "they demoted me. Along with almost every adventurer in the city."

"You hadn't just let loose a cohort of enemies to attack adventurers, though," Clive said regretfully. "I think I've earned us all worse than just demotion."

Neil leaned forward in his chair to put a comforting hand on Clive's shoulder.

"Don't worry about it," Neil said. "Everyone here agrees with you."

"Yes," Humphrey agreed. "We've just been talking about the things that negatively impact the Adventure Society. The way we fight back against that influence is by remaining independent. The way they're meant to allow adventurers to be. If we had just capitulated, we would have been contributing to the problem."

"Look at you, fighting authority," Belinda told Humphrey. "You're turning into Jason."

Humphrey looked at her for a long moment, then took a plate from his storage space and held it out for her.

"Sandwich?" he asked in a deadpan voice and everyone but Vidal started laughing.

"This is a very weird team," Vidal said.

Chapter 729

Ordinary Everyday Adventuring

Jason's team had been expecting the emergence of elemental-infused messengers to accelerate the plans of Jes Fin Kaal. Instead, they heard nothing as they continued taking and fulfilling contracts, Shade picking up new ones as he delivered their reports. For the first time in a long time, the team were all together for some ordinary everyday adventuring.

Jason's time on Earth, fighting in monster-filled proto-spaces and later, full-blown monster waves, had allowed him to reach the wall that was the fourth stage of silver-rank faster than his team members. Once he reached it, however, Earth's lack of powerful threats had stalled him out. Through proto-spaces, monster waves and transformation zones, Jason had killed more monsters and other threats than the rest of his team combined. Even so, his progress had been limited by the threat those monsters provided.

Jason had reached a point where few silver-rank monsters were a genuine danger, even in massive numbers. He'd been throwing himself at whole herds or not using various powers to try and push his limits, but once he hit the wall there was little progress to be made on Earth. The few gold-rank threats were too few and too dangerous, as Jason was only willing to take on specific monsters of that rank. If the match-up was bad for his powers, he was still unwilling to take them on.

The monsters of Earth had not been the greatest challenges Jason had faced on his homeworld, but those other dangers were not ones that he could resolve with just his essence abilities. He was forced to wield powerful artefacts, wade into dimensional anomalies and develop spiritual powers he barely understood even now. His understanding of the soul, reality and the wider cosmos expanded, laying out a pathway that would carry him into the distant future. In the immediacy, however, his essence abilities were left fallow, without growth.

Jason's need to rely on spiritual strength continued with his return to Pallimustus. Although his essence abilities did resume a glacial upward trajectory, Jason was again forced to rely on his strange new abilities, and at no small cost. While he convalesced from over-taxing himself, his companions continued fighting their way through the monster surge, slowly but surely catching up to him at the advancement wall.

Clive, Humphrey and Belinda, had an inherent advantage in the form of intrinsic human gifts. Their essence abilities advanced at a slight but measurably faster rate than others, too slight to be of value at lower ranks. Now they had hit the wall and every

measure of growth counted, it gave them a slight edge. For Clive and Belinda, this gave them time to pursue magical study without falling behind the others. For Humphrey, it meant that he could be slightly ahead of the pack, which gave him confidence as team leader.

As their non-stop adventuring entered its third week, Jason was the first to take an ability beyond the fourth level of silver rank, but only by a matter of days. As the team ploughed through roaming monsters and cleaned up contracts, Jason's perception ability finally crossed the line just two days before Humphrey's.

Gary, Farrah and Travis were not taking part in the flurry of contract work. They were in Jason's soul realm, using the advantages it offered to advance their various professions. This left the team eight strong with the semi-permanent addition of Rufus and Taika. Rufus would resume teaching but was in no rush, having rediscovered his love of adventure when not burdened with the leadership role. As for Taika, his goal was Earth and the people he had left behind there. His passage home, however, was entirely reliant on Jason's ability to forge it.

Having shifted their base of operations in anticipation of new contracts, the team watched Jason's cloud flask produce a new cloud palace. They did so from the edge of a mountainous plateau, the cloud-stuff sliding down the cliff to form buildings hanging off the face.

"You have a lot more control over the camouflage version of your cloud buildings compared to Emir," Rufus said.

"Emir never uses his camouflage versions," Jason said. "His are always big and flashy. But yeah, my deeper soul connection gives me a lot more say in the structural details. Hey, who won the betting pool?"

"What betting pool?" Belinda asked.

"I know you make bets on me," Jason said. "Who had me down for the first one to get an ability moving past the wall?"

"That's not really the kind of thing we bet on," Belinda told him. "It's more like what country will declare war on you personally."

"What god you're going to offer a sandwich," Clive said.

"Which diamond ranker you're going to hit on," Taika added.

"When you'll love up Humphrey's mum," Neil said.

"Neil..." Humphrey growled.

"I can't have been the only one seeing that dynamic," Neil said.

“Jason’s like that with every powerful woman he meets,” Rufus said. “We really should do a better job of keeping him away from princesses.”

Shade emerged from Jason’s shadow.

“You have the next batch of contracts?” Jason asked him.

“Not as yet, Mr Asano. I decided to postpone their acquisition as events appear to finally be going into motion.”

“The messengers?”

“There is more activity than we have seen in the last few weeks,” Shade confirmed. “More pressing is that Lady Allayeth asked that I convey a message. She is ready to meet with you and a representative of the church of Liberty.”

“Does she have a time and date?”

“She has designated a location far from Yaresh or any other population centre.”

“I don’t suppose she setting us up for an ambush,” Belinda wondered.

“That’s why I’ll go alone,” Jason said. “If we misread her and it’s some kind of ambush, I have the best chance of getting away.”

Jason was using Shade as a vehicle to fly only a few metres over the jungle canopy. Shade’s form was that of an Earth vehicle, a personal flight device that amounted to a chair in a roll cage with a series of drone-style rotors for lift and propulsion. It was, of course, all black, looking more aggressive and sinister than the vehicles it was based on. It also had more speed and the flight time was essentially infinite.

“I know what you’re doing, Shade.”

“I am conveying you through the air as directed, Mr Asano.”

“You’ve been increasingly using Earth-style transport as I’ve been coming to terms with my time there.”

“Magical vehicles are, for the most part, less practical than technological ones,” Shade pointed out. “Obviously, living mounts and vehicles stylised in the form of living creatures are not as practical as purpose-designed vehicles. Even the more practical vehicle designs, like skimmers, demonstrate a level of inefficiency only seen on Earth when hooligans modify their own cars. Utilising magic to overcome the technical drawbacks of ordinarily non-magical vehicles offers the best of both worlds.”

“That’s well-reasoned,” Jason said. “But we both know that’s not the primary reason. You’re acclimatising me back to Earth with demonstrations of what’s good about it. As I become less emotionally distraught about my time there, you’re introducing the Earth elements you knew better than to pull out when I first returned to Pallimustus.”

Jason snorted a laugh.

"I sound accusatory," he said. "I'm sorry, Shade; what I'm trying to say is thank you. You're always looking out for me."

"I'm glad you can face this with equanimity, Mr Asano."

Jason sensed the presence of a priestess from a good way away, the distinctive whiff of divine power hanging in the air around her. It had surprised him to discover that other people found divine power almost undetectable unless they were looking for it with intrusive perceptual probes. To his senses, it lit up like a beacon.

The location was a town, destroyed and abandoned. The jungle had reclaimed it to the point that there was nowhere to land even the small vehicle. The flight device exploded into a cloud of shadows like a magician's trick, Jason's momentum carrying him out of it to plunge through the air, angling his body. The shadows trailed him as he conjured his Cloak of Night that spread out like wings, turning his controlled fall into a glide.

A massive grin split Jason's face. A few weeks of doing normal jobs with his team and helping out people in need had done more for his mood than all the brooding introspection in the world. Sailing through the air, he was able to appreciate just how amazing the life he was living could be.

"I've got to stop saving the world," he muttered. Although his words were snatched away on the wind, Shade heard them perfectly.

"We both know that you won't step away, Mr Asano. Perhaps you should simply enjoy the moment and leave tomorrow to tomorrow."

"You're a wise man, Shade."

Although Jason had sensed only the priestess, two people were sitting on the low remains of a brick wall as Jason descended towards it. Allayeth turned to look in Jason's direction, the woman with her following suit. Jason swooped in, reducing his weight at the last moment as he landed on a soft-looking patch of moss that could still have hidden some awkward footing.

The two women stood as Jason dismissed his cloak to reveal a simple, casual suit underneath. The fabric was light and breathable, the effect enhanced subtly by magic to be comfortable even in the muggy heat. Jason mentally thanked Alejandro Albericci and his expert tailoring.

The priestess with Allayeth was not a gold-ranker but a silver, meaning that she was not the high-priestess. Allayeth nodded at a section of road not too badly overgrown and they converged on that point. Jason looked around, seeing an incongruity in the ruins.

“What happened to this town?” he asked. “The remains of this building have been weathered about right for the monster surge, but this looks like years of growth.”

“Guess,” Allayeth told him and he took another look around.

“Plant monsters?” he postulated.

“Something like that,” Allayeth told him.

“You didn’t pick this place because it was the closest point that was both convenient and discreet,” he said.

“Later,” she told him. “For the moment, allow me to introduce Priestess Raelia Cass. Priestess; Jason Asano.”

“G’day,” Jason said, shaking her hand.

The priestess was human, compared to the elves far more common in the region. Her dark hair was wavy and long, setting off her typically attractive silver-rank features well. She looked like she was barely twenty-one years old and Jason guessed her to be close to his own twenty-nine.

“I’ve been warned about you, Jason Asano,” she said, her voice curious, not hostile. Jason glanced at Allayeth who shook her head.

“Not by me,” she said.

“My Lady,” the priestess said, referring to the goddess Liberty, “likes to keep a wary eye on Dominion’s favourites.”

“That makes sense,” Jason said. “I don’t suppose you know how to get off that list?”

“I do,” Raelia said. “I fear it is beyond you, however.”

“Oh?”

“What Dominion likes in you is not the autocratic tendencies you consistently demonstrate,” she said. “It is the fact that you rarely regret them.”

“Ah,” Jason said. “It’s hard to be penitent when you feel no need for penance. I fear I will never be in your lady’s good graces.”

“While you have definite tendencies that she does not care for, Mr Asano, she knows that freedom is an important principle for you, despite your inclinations. More importantly, she respects that you are willing to act on that principle.”

“How much do you know about these ‘autocratic tendencies’ of mine?” Jason asked.

“Nothing at all,” she said. “My goddess has only told me that you have them. That you have a habit of deciding the way things should be and then moving the land and the sky to make it so, whatever anyone else might think. Or how they might be affected.”

“That’s true enough,” Jason acknowledged. “But you do know what I want, right?”

"Lady Allayeth has made things clear. My goddess has qualms about participating as she cannot see into the astral space you are holding them in. She is all for freeing these people as any form of incarceration is unacceptable to her, but she also does not want invaders let loose to rejoin their kind's oppressive invasion. She would like to see the leader of your prisoners for herself."

"That's one of the reasons we're out here, then," Jason deduced. "So I can pop out a messenger or two outside of Charist's primary perception area."

"Yes," Allayeth said.

Jason didn't fuss about and immediately brought out Marek Noir Vargas. The messenger answered a lengthy list of questions, ranging from his intentions to his current state to the history of how he landed in his current situation. There were more questions about Jason himself than he was entirely comfortable with. Finally, the priestess allowed Marek to return to Jason's soul realm.

"The goddess is satisfied," the priestess announced. "She will aid you, but the important work must be undertaken by you, Mr Asano."

"I'm not afraid of a little hard work."

"Good. These messengers will need to be released into the cosmos, not just this world, and accomplishing that falls to you. When you do achieve this, the goddess will hide your actions. No one will see or overhear, even should they be in a position to directly observe. The goddess Knowledge will not learn of it, even from your mind after the task is done."

"You can hide things from Knowledge? And keep it hidden?"

"Gods have the ability to overrule other gods when it comes to their own area of influence. Freeing people from your custody, having already freed them from bondage of the soul places this issue very much under Liberty's authority."

"I see. But until I figure out how to set them loose, she won't do anything."

"The gods exist to help and guide our actions, Mr Asano, not to act in our stead."

"I'm very onboard with that stance," Jason told her. "Any tips on how to gate these people out into the cosmos? I have some other interests in dimensional transgression that might dovetail nicely."

"No," the priestess said sternly. "On a wholly unrelated note, she wishes me to convey that choosing to claim the messenger's study was a very wise choice."

Jason's personal condition for working with Jes Fin Kaal had been the sealed study of the dead diamond-rank messenger.

“Good to know,” Jason said. “Is that everything from your goddess? Can I turn my attention to whatever reason Lady Allayeth wanted to meet over?”

“You may. And if I may say, Mr Asano, you were far less difficult to deal with than the rumours have suggested.”

“I’m a perfectly reasonable man.”

“We just had such a good meeting, Mr Asano. Let us not start lying now.”

Chapter 730

Drunken Lies and Mythic Legends

In a ghost town largely reclaimed by jungle, Jason and Allayeth watched Raelia open a portal and leave through it.

“She held up well,” Jason observed.

“She did,” Allayeth said. “It didn’t show in her body language at all. Do you think she was more scared of me or you?”

“I’m hoping you.”

Jason smiled but his expression was resigned.

“It’s funny,” he said, his tone suggesting that it wasn’t. “I used to work so hard to be scary. I don’t do that anymore, yet now people are starting to be scared of me.”

“Are you genuinely surprised? People don’t understand your power or your behaviour. Your reputation is based on little-understood events that land somewhere between drunken lies and mythic legends. You have a problem with authority yourself, but authority is just the power to impose your will on the world around you. Everyone who tries to impose their will on you falls short, myself included. When you decide to impose your will, what happens?”

“You make it sound like I’m breezing through life, doing what I will.”

“Aren’t you? You’re not getting everything you want, Jason, but when you truly need something to happen, has anyone ever stopped you? Gods? Great astral beings? Death itself? Somewhere near the top of the list of questions I still have is that there’s been talk of you remaking chunks of reality. Putting aside how, tell me why you did that?”

“I had to. The dimensional membrane around my home planet was brittle and cracking. Dimensional events were punching holes in it that would have destroyed my world if I hadn’t patched those holes.”

“And when you went to do that, you already had the power to do so?”

“I kind of figured it out as I went.”

“So, the universe decided to break down and you decided to not let it.”

“That is an extremely skewed way of looking at it.”

“But is there anything you do that can’t be looked at that way? You need something to happen, or not happen, and you get your way, regardless of the people, entities or natural forces of the cosmos pitted against you.”

“I can see how that might seem like it’s the case, but every instance was a mad scramble of exploiting circumstance, other parties using me as a proxy and a big wet sack full of luck.”

“And I can see how it might not seem special when you went through these events one at a time. But there are only so many dogs you can murder before people start calling you a dog murderer.”

“A dog murderer?”

“As a random example.”

“That doesn’t feel random. Do you think I’m running around murdering dogs?”

“No, Jason, I think you’re running around doing impossible things. You have your own private universe. You keep a temple to yourself in a bottle that you hang around your neck.”

Jason touched a finger to the miniaturised cloud flask hanging on the necklace with his magic amulet.

“Jason, *I’m* scared of you. When your rank catches up to everything else, a planet won’t hold you. You’ll be like your friend Dawn, needing to restrict your behaviour on planets like this so you don’t break too much of them. And I’m not telling you anything you don’t know. You knew that even a fragment of what you’ve shown me would alarm me to the point that I considered killing you. It’s why you warned Charist and myself off.”

“That backfired. It might have warded off your friend, at least for now, but it didn’t stop you.”

“No. Charist doesn’t like how evasive I’ve been, by the way.”

“He’s not scared of me?”

“I think he is, and that’s the problem. He went to kick a rock out of his path and stubbed his toe, and now he’s wondering what’s under that rock.”

“Will he be a problem?”

“I don’t think so, but this tension between your team and the Adventure Society has gotten him more aggressive about getting answers from me.”

“What did you tell him?”

“That he needs to stop thinking of you as a silver-ranker and start seeing you as a peer.”

“And how did he take that?”

“He asked me why I think that. I told him that, if nothing else, there wasn’t much point killing you. That I believe the Builder’s assertion that you couldn’t resurrect again until gold rank was wrong, out of date or a lie.”

“You picked up on that, then.”

“I felt immortality in your astral realm. Even if your ability to resurrect is limited, you’ve stopped ageing, haven’t you?”

“So have you,” he said defensively, getting a laugh from the diamond-ranker.

“Look, what is it you’ve brought me out here for?” he asked. “Something about this town and a plant monster?”

She sighed and looked around the town. Not a single building was intact and the ruins were all but buried in growth.

“What does this town tell you?” she asked.

“That something came through, trashed the place and left behind something that massively accelerated plant growth. These ruins aren’t old enough for how much jungle is crawling over them. And there are no animals. Not bugs, not birds.”

He concentrated his aura senses on the ground.

“No worms. Something’s dug into the soil. Plant roots?”

“Fungus.”

“Some kind of roaming mushroom creature? It consumes anything or anyone made of meat and turns them into super-fertiliser?”

“Something like that. Not quite so straightforward, unfortunately,” she said. “Have you ever heard of an amalgeth?”

“No,” Jason said. “Shade?”

“An amalgeth is a fungal monster,” Shade said as he emerged from Jason’s shadow. “An extremely dangerous one, from recollection. I believe that they are intelligent and able to shape-shift.”

“Yes,” Allayeth confirmed, “but that is only the beginning. In addition to being able to consume living things and take on their forms, they can mask their auras almost perfectly.”

“That’s why me,” Jason said. “You want someone with a better chance to spot them in hiding.”

“Yes. I know that you are getting ready for the underground expedition, but since you sent your familiar for another batch of contracts, I was hoping to convince you to participate in this one specifically. Your team won’t be the only one on it.”

“An expedition?”

“Similar to the one where the world-taker worms were discovered. Different teams investigating various towns. The teams have all been chosen for having at least one member with powerful or unusual senses. I wanted to use your auxiliary, Estella Warnock, until I realised what you’ve got her doing.”

“You didn’t bring anything down on her, did you?”

“No. I was careful.”

“Thank you. Why are you delivering what amounts to an ordinary contract in person? To give my team and the Adventure Society some space before the adjudicator from the Continental Council shows up?”

“Yes. At my suggestion.”

“Of course it was your suggestion. What lunatic would go around telling diamond-rankers what to do?”

She looked at him from under raised eyebrows.

“Tell me about this contract,” he said and she rolled her eyes at his changing of the subject.

“This town we’re in now was wiped out early during the monster surge,” she said. “It wasn’t discovered to be like this for weeks, with everything that has transpired over the last half a year. People aren’t travelling and communication isn’t what it was. When the town was discovered to have been wiped out, a team of adventurers were deployed. They found nothing alive that wasn’t a plant or a fungus. Even flying insects wouldn’t come near. They swept the region in case the population had been dragged off or they could find what did it, but found nothing. There was a monster surge taking place, so they made a report, flagged it for further investigation and moved on.”

“Why was it discovered now?” Jason asked. “I can’t imagine Yaresh has so little going on now that people are making their way through the report backlogs.”

“It was happenstance,” Allayeth said. “The Adventure Society jobs hall had some records being moved so they could make repairs and someone stumbled across it. They happened to recognise the signs of an amalgeth and passed it up the line with a priority tag.”

“You’re worried about more towns being wiped out?”

“Yes. Most monsters don’t reproduce, but the amalgeth does and its life cycle is extremely predatory. It infiltrates a population centre, usually small and isolated. It claims to be some kind of traveller in distress. Lone survivor of a monster attack or the like, trying to allay suspicion. At first, the creature does nothing. It learns to fit in and becomes part of the community. Then it starts taking things. Slowly at first. Herd animals. Pets. A person, if it thinks it can get away with it, but that usually come later. They’re patient, often timing their predations with active monster activity, to pass off the blame.”

“I think I see where this is going. They slowly escalate until the townsfolk finally catch on that the new person in town is the bad guy, at which point the amalgeth goes ham and kills every living thing.”

“Eventually, yes. But the infiltration is a process that takes months or years, usually. They are quite good at hiding the truth, and the more they kill before being discovered, the stronger they grow. The people and animals they kill become a supply of mutable flesh they can use to heal themselves or take monstrous forms when they finally reveal themselves.”

“My familiar does something similar,” Jason said. “You saw him floating through the sky in a glass cocoon. I call his collection of organic material biomass, which isn’t strictly accurate, but video games use the term a lot.”

“What are video games?”

“Okay, that would take too long to explain. But he keeps leftover biomass inside my soul realm, in a big pit. I don't have any of the paths leading to it; it's pretty gross. The amalgeth save their biomass up as well?”

“Yes. Then, once they are finally exposed, they absorb it and take on a hybrid flesh-fungal form. They go on a rampage, absorbing and killing every single living creature, collecting all that... biomass. Then they use it to form another of their kind, fully grown and with all the memories of the original. This process triggers accelerated plant growth over a fairly wide area. Then they both go off in search of new towns to infiltrate.”

“So we don’t know how many of them there are.”

“No. I have checked several towns myself, uncovering and killing one. But I have an obligation to defend Yaresh in its vulnerable state, along with other responsibilities. That is why the Adventure Society has established this expedition. I have a list of locations and a map, if you accept the contract.”

“I’ll need to talk to the others, but I imagine they will say yes.”

Jason's cloud palace was a string of buildings set on the face of a cliff, linked by a series of open stairs and elevating platforms. The buildings themselves looked carved from stone with the out-facing walls of each building made of single sheets of glass. Inside the largest building, looking out over miles of rainforest and out to the sea, Jason explained the contract to his team.

“I’ve heard of amalgeths,” Clive said. “They always start at silver rank, but if they reproduce enough times, they advance to gold.”

“Can we face one of them at gold rank?” Humphrey asked.

“It depends on the point of their life cycle they’re in,” Clive said. “If they’ve just eaten a town full of people, no chance. They can forgo reproducing to use all that accumulated biomass for combat. Even a silver-rank one at that stage would be extremely challenging to face. If we get them at the stage where they’ve accumulated a large supply of organic mass but haven’t consumed a whole town, gold-rank would be extremely sketchy, but silver-rank wouldn’t be too challenging. Early stage, when they’re just starting their cycle, we’d have to be careful but I think we could handle a gold.”

“We’ll need to scope out the amalgam if we find one, then,” Humphrey said. “Then we can assess whether to take it on ourselves or call in backup.”

“I have some backup to call in right now,” Jason said. “I know someone I suspect will be very useful, and he’s just about done with his nap.”

Chapter 731

Stash Wakes Up From a Nap

Sophie and Humphrey made their way through the building affixed to the side of a cliff, arriving at a window wall with a gorgeous view of the rainforest below, stretching out to the distant coast. In front of the window was a huge mound of blankets. Humphrey yanked off the blankets one by one and tossed them aside as he dug his way through the pile. Finally, he revealed a dragon with rainbow-coloured iridescent scales. It was the size of a large dog and was asleep, hugging a full-sized plush replica of itself.

Humphrey struggled to maintain his stern expression for a moment before failing miserably.

“Okay, that’s adorable,” he conceded.

“Where did he get that thing?”

“From Jason. Once he gave up on the secret identity thing—”

“He was so bad at that.”

“Yes, he was. But he said that if we’re going to be famous, we should capitalise on merchandising opportunities.”

“Meaning that he wants to make toys?”

“I think so.”

“What for?”

“Money, I guess.”

“Can’t he just make infinite money?”

“He also said something about branding.”

“As in, burning an ownership mark into people’s flesh? That doesn’t sound like him.”

“He said it’s a different kind of branding.”

“So, he wants to make toy versions of us?”

“Of the familiars, I think. The one of Onslow does look pretty good. He also said something about a body pillow with Gary’s picture on it. Who would buy that?”

“I would buy that. I would buy that immediately.”

“He said he didn’t know if there was a market for it. I asked him about a body pillow with you on it but he said that would be a very bad idea.”

“It would.”

“Why?”

She turned to look at him.

“Really?” she asked.

“Really.”

She stepped in front of him and cupped his face in her hands.

“My sweet, innocent boy,” she said and then pushed up on her toes to gently kiss him. A groaning sound came from the floor.

“Eww, gross,” Stash complained sleepily, a very twelve-year-old human voice coming from the dragon.

“It’s time to get up,” Humphrey told him. “We have to hunt some monsters.”

Stash gripped a blanket in his teeth and pulled it back over himself.

“Sleepy.”

“It’s some kind of shape-changing monster,” Humphrey encouraged. “That could be fun.”

Stash flapped awkwardly at the blanket from underneath so it also covered toy Stash, then went still. Humphrey gave Sophie an exasperated look and she grinned.

“Stash,” she said in a voice so sweet that Humphrey gave a startled shake of the head. “It’s time to go see Colin.”

The blanket exploded up into the air as Stash grew to the size of a horse, tucked his toy under one arm and did a three-legged dragon gallop out of the room.

“ON SLOW!” his voice bellowed from the hall. “WE’RE GOING TO SEE COLIN!”

A certain section of Jason’s soul realm felt like an old English estate that had been abandoned to neglect. Tall hedges looked like they may have once been scraps of a hedge maze with sections variously absent or overgrown. What may have once have been topiaries were now massive thorny bushes holding the vague shape of monsters.

The grass underfoot was thick and deep green. The hedges and bushes were a deeper green, sometimes almost black around the tips of leaves or thorny protrusions. The only elements of bright colour were blood-red berries that had the enticing allure of cheese in a trap.

Gothic buildings were visible over the high foliage, the ornate dark stone crumbling around the edges. The pathways never led to them, jutting up over long tall hedges or through passages choked with inch-long thistles with wet, black tips. Like old, abandoned temples they had a few high broken windows where the remnants of stained glass showed just enough of what had once been depicted to indicate that the original images had not carried positive imagery.

Jason and his companions walked along the wide and winding grassy pathways. The tall hedges and ominous buildings meant that little direct sunlight reached them and what did was oddly muted. Given the clear sky overhead, there was a little too much gloom.

With Jason were Humphrey, Sophie and Clive, along with Clive's rune tortoise, Onslow. The last member of the group was Stash who had taken the form of a celestine child. His hair and eyes were silver with dark chocolate skin and an unusual absence of moustache. He sat cross-legged, riding atop Onslow's shell. As they moved along the wide, grassy paths, Humphrey craned his neck to take in the looming surrounds.

"Jason," he said. "I know that everything in this place is a part of you."

"It's kind of hard to miss with his aura drenched everywhere," Clive said.

"Yes," Humphrey agreed. "And I've noticed that your aura shows variations depending on which part of your soul realm we're in."

"Yes, I've been cataloguing the differences," Clive said. "The differentiation was quite marked at first, but the zones have become more varied and complex over time."

"Like this vampire manor estate," Humphrey said.

"Vampires have creepy gothic castles in this world too?"

"Only really in stories," Humphrey admitted. "If they all lived in decrepit manors and abandoned churches then adventurers would find them a lot easier."

"I guess people who sleep through the day and feed on blood tend to inspire certain narratives," Jason reasoned. "I think it's mostly an act, though. My friend Craig is a vampire and he just plays it up so that naïve, attractive women will let him suck their blood."

"And you accept that?" Sophie asked.

"I checked it out," Jason said. "He never feeds too much, and they are *extremely* into it. Most vampires from my world were like that before the old ones woke up and everything went nuts. They had more of a 'luring people into their creepy mansion' vibe."

"Jason, your aura is never what I would describe as friendly," Humphrey said. "Not unless you're masking it. But it also seems to have that vibe that you mentioned. Domineering, predatory. Ominously well-suited to this particular environment."

"It makes sense," Jason said. "Dark essence, blood essence. I can see why my soul knocked out a place like this. Plus, this is where I store Colin's excess flesh pile."

"Excess flesh pile," Humphrey repeated under his breath, shaking his head. Jason watched him with a grin.

"You could have just called it biomass like you usually do," Clive pointed out.

“Yeah, but where's the fun in that?” Jason asked. “Oh, and I'd avoid getting too close to the bushes from here on in. They can be a bit hungry.”

“What do you mean by hungry?” Humphrey asked.

“Hungry. You know, wanting to eat things. Namely us. Well, you. Colin has a lot of influence on this area, and while he's a good boy, he does also yearn to devour every living thing on the planet.”

The others all turned to look at him.

“A bit,” Jason qualified. “He yearns a bit. It's like when you have a hobby you're really into. Knitting, for example. Sometimes life gets busy and you might go for a while without finding the time to sit down for a good knit. You yearn to do some knitting. Just a bit. It's like that with Colin.”

“Except, instead of wanting to knit,” Clive said, “he wants to wipe the world clean in a nightmare of hunger and flesh and blood.”

“Exactly,” Jason said. “You get it. And Farrah says I'm bad at explaining things.”

“I really hope you are,” Sophie said.

“Why would you hope that?” Jason asked her.

“Because, Jason,” Clive said, “your tone suggests you think you're saying something sensible when you're saying that you look at an apocalypse the way other people look at knitting.”

“Which is not sensible,” Sophie clarified.

“It's all perspective, I suppose,” Jason said.

“Yes,” Sophie agreed. “It is a matter of perspective, but let me try and explain it in a way that might sink in: One perspective is the sandwich and the other perspective is the mouth.”

“You're suggesting I'm losing the ability to see the point of view of the one that's about to get eaten?”

“None of us are foolish enough to claim knowledge of what's going on in your head, Jason,” Humphrey said. “But I remember those talks we used to have back in Greenstone. About right and wrong. About duty and responsibility. I remember that you have a habit of representing yourself or taking a position that doesn't reflect your actual beliefs, just to make a point.”

“Is that what I'm doing?” Jason asked lightly.

“Unless, a couple of minutes ago, you genuinely stopped caring about the deaths of everyone on the planet. And we both know that isn't the case, which leads to the question of what point are you trying to make?”

“Well, you mentioned those talks we used to have. When you boil them down, what was every one of those talks about?”

“Power,” Humphrey said. “Who has it, and who should. What’s done with it and what should be done.”

“Exactly,” Jason said, throwing out his arms to indicate the soul realm. “Every day, the power I have in here gets a little closer to being the power I have out there. I’m twenty-nine years old. By the time I’m thirty-nine, we’ll be gold rankers. How old will I be when we reach diamond?”

“You just casually assume that we’ll all reach diamond,” Clive said.

“Yep,” Jason confirmed. “And once I reach that point, there won’t be any limits on Colin’s natural power anymore. He’ll have the full strength of an apocalypse beast. I’ll probably be worse, but let’s put that aside for the moment and focus on just my familiar. If I tell him to wipe out a planet, will he say no? Wiping out planets is kind of his thing.”

Jason stopped walking and let out a sigh. The others stopped as well.

“No one should have that power,” Jason said. “But I will. What happens if I decide that an apocalypse isn’t any more important than knitting?”

“Then we’ll slap you on the head until your head gets right,” Sophie said, exasperation in her voice. “You told us about your world. Did a culture not based on lording it over people with personal magic make things better? Or did people just pick something other than magic to be the power and use that to exploit the people without it?”

“The second one,” Jason admitted.

“Then knock off with the sad-boy brooding,” Sophie said. “I know it’s kind of your thing, but in case you hadn’t noticed, you have a habit of making enemies. The sort of enemies where having an apocalypse in your back pocket might not be enough.”

“That’s a good point,” Jason acknowledged. “Balance of power. I shouldn’t worry about me when so many things that are more powerful than me and suck more than I do.”

“Good,” Sophie said. “Now, can we get on with waking up your familiar?”

“We have to get Clive first,” Jason said.

“What are you talking about?” Clive asked. “I’m right here.”

“What is that?” Humphrey asked as he turned to look at Clive. Humphrey had spotted a vine that had crept close to Clive’s foot. The vine, as if having heard it was noticed, sprang to life, wrapping around Clive’s shin. It toppled him over as it withdrew, Clive yelping as he was dragged into a hedge.

“I told him not to get too close,” Jason said.

“You’re a bit covered in thorn marks there, Clive,” Jason pointed out. “It looks like an extremely aggressive form of chicken pox. To the point that the little dots bleed a bit.”

Clive was sitting on the grass, using Onslow's shell as a backrest as he glared at Jason.

“Jason, this your soul,” Clive said.

“It is,” Jason conceded.

“Then maybe you should avoid having your soul drag me into thorn bushes that try to eat me.”

“That's all automatic,” Jason said. “You know more than most about souls. If you could just change things because you want to, I'd have eye beams right now.”

Finally, they reached a path to a cluster of buildings that wasn't blocked by a hedge or Clive-eating bushes. There was a large open square made of the same dark brick as the buildings. Clock towers sat at each corner, but the clock faces were warped. Instead of numbers, there were symbols in the old tongue, the language older than the planet they were standing on. The hands of the clock were actual hands, moving and grasping at the air.

“Those symbols instead of the numbers,” Clive said. “I think they’re some of the basic patterns that Gordon uses for that strange ritual magic of his.”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “Shade and I have been discussing how that magic is linked to me.”

“We should talk about this,” Clive said, opening his rune portal to pluck out a notebook and pencil.

“Not the time, Clive,” Humphrey said. “That’s not what we’re here for.”

Clive grumbled but put his notebook away and they moved into the square.

In the middle of the square was a massive, round metal door set horizontally into the ground. As they approached, the metal door started sliding out of sight, revealing a deep shaft some thirty metres across and twice that deep.

They moved to the edge and looked down. Instead of continuing the brickwork of the square above, the shaft's walls were rough-hewn stone, obsidian black. Set into the wall like pegs were stone stairs winding their way down. At the bottom was what looked like a roiling pool of blood, glowing with an internal light that painted the bottom of the shaft red. A strong stench of coppery blood rose up to greet them.

“Jason,” Clive said. “This looks a lot like that chamber you took us to that one time.”

“The place where they tried to sacrifice you,” Humphrey said.

“Yep,” Jason confirmed. “It’s where they summoned a sanguine horror that we killed and I looted the awakening stone that let me summon Colin. Now it’s his flesh pit.”

“I really prefer the term ‘biomass storage,’” Clive said.

“Clive, look at it,” Sophie said. “That’s a flesh pit. Or a blood-flesh soup. I’m not sure if that sounds better or worse.”

Jason looked up just as a massive glass sphere floated into view over the buildings and hedges. Inside was a red mass that glowed from the inside, pulsing like a heartbeat.

“It’s time,” Jason said.

Cracks started appearing on the glass like an egg starting to hatch. Each glass fragment dissolved into nothing as it fell away, larger and larger shards breaking off until the fleshy mass inside started poking out. The flesh looked like a giant heart, not the love kind but the meat kind. Finally, the weight of it broke through the remaining glass and it fell into the hole like an offcut tossed away by a butcher.

The mass dropped through the shaft, splashing into the pool below.

Chapter 732

Welcome Back Colin

The giant, fleshy mass splashed into the roiling red pool at the bottom of the shaft. Jason winced at the sound which, even through the echo effect of the shaft, reminded him of messing up a dive and doing a painful belly flop.

“That was a weird sound,” Sophie said.

“Yep,” Jason agreed.

“It sounded exactly like when you hit a very fat man with a very large fish.”

Jason, Humphrey and Clive all turned to look at her.

“What?” she asked defensively. “I had a life before I met you people.”

Humphrey opened his mouth to ask many, many questions, but was interrupted by a horrifying alien shriek. It reverberated up through the shaft with a nails-on-chalkboard shrillness that seemed to dig into the group’s nerves. Jason moved to the edge to look down, the others quickly joining him.

The inside of the shaft was dark, the previous red glow no longer lighting up the bottom. The coppery tang of blood had gotten much stronger.

“Do we go down there?” Clive asked. “There are stairs, but I do not want to go down there.”

“Are you scared of a hole just because there’s a weird noise coming out of it?” Jason asked, then frowned as something occurred to him. “You know, I once asked your wife the exact same question *in a very* different context.”

“Oh, go jump in a hole,” Clive said bitterly. “Look, there’s one right there.”

“Fair enough,” Jason said and leapt into the void. His cloak manifested around him and slowed his descent into the dark. Shortly after he jumped, a thrumming sound pulsed up from the shaft, each beat accompanied by a momentary glow of red light. Like the heartbeat of some long-buried monster starting to wake, it was filled with terrible promise.

Slowly floating down the shaft, Jason couldn’t help but think back to his first day on Pallimustus. Captured by cultists looking to sacrifice him, trapped alongside people who were yet to become his precious friends. The cloak he now used and the perception ability allowing him to see in the dark were the only powers he’d possessed at the time. Faced with a neophyte sanguine horror, he and his new friends desperately managed to kill it before it had the chance to consume its way into becoming a world-devouring beast.

Jason’s soul had reproduced that sacrificial chamber as he called up a sanguine horror inside it. Colin, as a familiar, was limited by Jason’s potential compared to the

sanguine horror the cult had summoned. Both Jason and Colin gained benefits from their connection, however, especially now the bond was closer than that of a mere summoned familiar. As for limitations, the day would come when that was no longer an issue for either of them.

As he drew closer to the bottom of the shaft, a jolt of excitement passed through Jason in anticipation. Like the original sacrifice chamber, the bottom of the shaft had a ring of open floor around the pit of blood. The floor was wet and red from when Colin's flesh mass crashed down from above, but the pit was still full to the brim, churning like a witch's cauldron.

The mass itself was submerged, only seen as a dark shape with each heartbeat strobe of light. The thudding sound that came with it was deafening at the bottom of the shaft, a thunderous echo that hammered at the ears. Combined with the bitter taste of blood choking the air, the bottom of the shaft was an assault on the senses. Sophie and Clive complained about it loudly as they descended on the back of Onslow's shell with Humphrey and Stash.

Jason ignored them, eyes locked on the blood pool filling the pit, fresh undulations roiling the surface with each pulse of light and sound. More and more, Colin's transitory state felt like the heart of some vast beast, torn from its body and yet refusing to stop beating.

The others fell quiet as they joined Jason in his vigil. Even Humphrey's rebellious dragon familiar watched in sober silence. The pulses of light slowed and stopped over time, the thudding heartbeat doing the same. The smell of blood did not fade, even growing stronger as the blood pool stopped churning and started draining like a bath. As it emptied, they saw that the mass inside it was gone.

The liquid continued to drain until it was revealed that there was no hole at the bottom, draining it away. Jason moved to the edge of the now-empty pool, looking down several metres. There was a humanoid figure lying prone and naked. It looked identical to Jason in shape but was entirely blood red. It was the blood clone form that Colin often assumed.

As they watched, the figure started to change. Portions of the body took on other shades, shifting from the monochrome scarlet. The skin texture shifted from the gloss of wet blood, although the hair retained that shine as it turned into Jason's usual shampoo-commercial black.

When the blood clone completed the transformation into an identical copy of Jason, Colin opened his eyes to reveal one difference remained. Instead of the blue and orange

eye-shaped nebulas Jason had instead of eyes, Colin had red embers burning in a void. He pushed himself to his feet as a rust-red robe was conjured to cover his nakedness.

- Your familiar and bonded avatar [Colin] has become your [Voice of the Will].
 - As a [Voice of the Will], the summoned vessel of [Colin] has been modified. The vessel can advance in rank without a new vessel being summoned. The cost to summon a new vessel if destroyed is significantly increased.
-

Colin lightly leapt the several metres out of the pool as Jason stepped back, his doppelganger standing in front of him as they looked at each other.

“You know what?” Jason asked.

“I’m a very handsome man?” Colin said in Jason’s voice.

“Yes,” Jason said with a grin. “Yes, you are.”

“Neil isn’t here,” Sophie said. “If he was, I think he would say this is true love at last.”

Jason and Colin let out identical chuckles.

“Okay, that’s creepy,” Clive said.

“Compared to the subterranean flesh pit we’re standing in?” Sophie asked him.

“I guess not,” Clive acknowledged.

Jason and Colin smiled at the interplay but quickly went back to examining one another over with assessing looks.

- The vessel of your [Voice of the Will] now possesses four distinct forms: swarm, the worm that walks, apocalypse beast, and Voice of the Will.
- Current form: Voice of the Will.

Form Four: [Voice of the Will]

- As a vessel for your soul, the Voice of the Will form has enhanced intellect compared to other forms. In this form, [Colin] loses the majority of his own abilities but can fully utilise the majority of yours. Abilities related to your nature as a nascent astral hegemon cannot be replicated. Essence abilities of the familiar, perception and aura types are not replicated but are replaced with other abilities.
 - In this form, [Colin] may exert influence over messengers you have branded using your authority.
 - Current number of branded messengers: 0.
-

“Nascent astral hegemon,” Jason said, the phrase standing out. “Do you know what that means?”

“No,” Colin said. “I assume — as I suspect you do as well — that it's related to your progress as a variant astral king.”

“It says that you have enhanced intellect while in this form.”

“Not that enhanced,” Colin said. “Only to the same level as you.”

“Hey...”

“I take it back,” Clive said. “This is creepier than being in a subterranean flesh pit.”

“Does it worry you?” Jason asked Colin. “Your mind degenerating as you take other forms?”

“It's not degenerating,” Colin explained, “but merely changing. My other forms are all swarm variants requiring different levels of hive mind to function. The 'enhanced' intellect of this form is merely a re-tasking of mental ability because there is only one of me.”

“That was very clear,” Jason said. “And people say I'm not good at explaining things.”

“They're right,” Colin told him. “That's why you need a Voice.”

Jason and Colin shared a grin as Sophie groaned.

“This is becoming insufferably smug,” she complained. “That's tolerable when there's only one of you, but this is too much.”

Jason and Colin both turned to look at Sophie, then back to one another.

“Another form?” Colin asked.

“Please,” Jason said.

Colin held out an arm that turned back to monochrome red and started spraying leeches into the pit. They kept gushing out like water from a fire hose, half-filling the pit.

“I normally can't maintain two separate forms,” Colin explained, “but in your soul realm, I can use the excess biomass to demonstrate the other states I can assume. Explanations come easier when they aren't just screeching the word 'hungry' over and over in a language that can't be fully expressed in just sound.”

“Sure,” Jason said.

Form One: [Swarm]

- Increased biomass capacity and hive mind cohesion range.
- Absorb life force to temporarily increase maximum biomass. Biomass must be consumed, discarded or stored within a certain period or be lost.

“The original swarm state,” humanoid Colin explained, “doesn't have any fancy bells and whistles, just a butt-load of leeches. The advantages are that I can use more biomass

than the other forms, and my hive mind won't start losing track of individual leeches until they're much further away. That allows me to spread out and eat a lot more people."

"Jason..." Humphrey said.

"Oh, come on, Hump," Jason said. "Are you going to tell a bird not to fly?"

"If it's flying off to eat people, yes. You and I have killed bird monsters together so they wouldn't fly off and eat people."

"Colin's a good boy," Jason said. "He's only going to eat bad people. Isn't that right, Colin?"

"It is," Colin said. "People who oppress others and live a life of violence."

"Exactly," Jason said.

"But not Jason," Colin continued. "He gets a pass."

"Hey," Jason said, turning back to Colin. "Who's side are you on?"

"Justice?" Colin suggested.

"Okay, let's try another one of those forms. Maybe one with a bit less lip."

Colin chuckled and the pool of leeches half-filling the pit started to shrink down. As it reached the size of a small mound, bloody rags emerged from the pile to wrap around it, encapsulating the leeches and squeezing them into a humanoid shape until it looked like an old movie mummy. More rags roughly wove together and draped over the figure as a hood and cloak. There were two small gaps in the face where the eyes would be and a larger one in place of the mouth. They revealed the leeches pressed together inside the rags, writhing and flashing rings of teeth. Some fell out of the mouth and eye gaps, tumbling to the floor like fat, carnivorous tears.

Form Two: [The Worm That Walks]

- Use rags to encapsulate worms and entangle foes.

"This is another form I've been using for a long time," Colin said. "Nothing new here. Fewer leeches, but more utility. Because I don't need the range or the multi-tasking of the full swarm, I can think a little more tactically in this state."

"Didn't you switch from the rags to red leather straps?" Sophie asked.

"I can use either," Colin said as the coarse cloth turned into neat leather straps, giving a much less ragged appearance. "I kind of like the rags, to be honest."

"What about the last form?" Clive asked. "That's something new, right?"

“Yes,” Colin said. “My first, second and fourth forms are adaptations of ones I could already take. The third form is something new; a result of consuming the world-taker worm queen.”

The leather straps wrapped around the worms turned back to rags and bulged outwards as the worms inside melded into a growing, singular form. The rags burst, revealing red limbs of thick, ropy muscle as the humanoid form bulked out.

“This better not be a Red Hulk thing,” Jason said. “Red Hulk sucks.”

As more of the rags burst, the figure in the pit diverged more from the humanoid. The arms grew longer and a second pair grew out. The rag-wrapped head sank into the torso. What looked like closed eyelids all over the exposed flesh opened and closed, revealing themselves as mouths covering the body. Leeches emerged from the tooth-filled maws to crawl all over it and long, prehensile tongues emerged, themselves ending in toothy mouths. When the transformation was complete it was a headless, four-armed monstrosity covered in gaping mouths, standing twice as tall as Humphrey even hunched over.

“Well,” Clive said. “I guess that’s my next nightmare covered.”

Form Three: [Apocalypse Beast]

- The [Apocalypse Beast] form has a large biomass with enhanced physical strength.
- When the [Apocalypse Beast] form feeds on enemies, powers belonging to them are randomly sealed and become available to [Colin]. Weaker abilities are absorbed at first with additional and more powerful abilities absorbed with extended feeding. Using the abilities restores their use to the enemy they were stolen from, with any cooldowns for those abilities triggered.
- The [Apocalypse Beast] form is strenuous. Feeding on life force or consuming biomass is required to maintain it or it will break down into a swarm state.

“This form is physically powerful,” Colin explained, “but also more agile than it looks. It’s a form that will allow me to take some fights head-on while also bringing some of Jason’s signature unpleasantness to the opponent.”

“What do you mean by signature unpleasantness?” Jason asked.

“Jason,” Sophie said, “your powers make people’s flesh rot and blood leak out like sweat.”

“I guess that is relatively unpleasant,” Jason conceded.

The blood giant then turned into blood that splashed over the floor of the pit.

“Completing my transfiguration into a Voice of the Will consumed most of the excess biomass I had stored up,” Colin said. “The blood giant form will consume it quickly as well

without something to feed on. If you need a combat form that doesn't continually eat into my reserves, this Voice of the Will form can use most of your abilities."

"That's all very impressive," Humphrey said. "Now it's time to get out of here so you can show us your new abilities in the field. We have to find some shape-shifting flesh monsters and kill them."

Humphrey's expression turned awkward as he looked at Colin.

"No offence," Humphrey said, drawing identical laughs from Jason and Colin.

"What do you think is creepier?" Clive asked. "A blood ogre covered in mouths with tongues that have their own mouths, or there being more than one Jason?"

"I've got avatars all through this space," Jason said.

"Yeah, but they're just perfect copies," Sophie said. "It just feels like some magic power. The Colin version of you is more real. He's just different enough to feel off, somehow."

"Uncanny," Clive agreed.

Colin walked over to Onslow where Stash had been sitting cross-legged, peering at Colin the whole time with an uncertain expression.

"What do you think, Stash? You've turned into Jason enough times."

"Don't know," Stash said. "You're weird."

Colin plucked a large biscuit out of the air, taking it from Jason's inventory. Stash grabbed it and bite half of it off in a single chomp.

"Welcome back Colin," he mumbled happily, spraying crumbs.

In the Pallimustus equivalent of what Jason knew as the Pacific Ocean was an island named Jorganis. A small island almost entirely covered by a grimy city, it was a haven for those operating outside of the auspices of the Adventure Society, the Magic Society or any form of legitimate government. The city was ruled by whatever groups could take and hold territory, with districts changing hands regularly. The only permanent institutions were temples to gods that weren't allowed to set up in civilised society, at least not openly.

One of the local factions currently holding power was a coterie of vampires, mostly the ordinary variety but led by a group of energy vampires. Another group, currently pressuring the vampires hard, was a handful of messengers that had moved in and rapidly claimed a section of city, despite their small number.

One of the messengers, a gold-ranker, had decided to put an end to the vampire clan and invaded their core stronghold, which was an old stone manor. He broke through the

roof, into the lounge used by the energy vampires. He laughed derisively as they grabbed him and tried to drain his energy. He tossed them away to all corners of the room.

“Pathetic,” he mocked. “Your feeble powers cannot consume me. I am a gestalt being; inherently superior. You should kneel and be honoured, but killing you all is acceptable as well.”

His disdainful expression turned to confusion as an ornate black and red blade jabbed out through his chest, having impaled him from behind. A hand gripped his shoulder and started draining his mana.

“Let’s try this again, shall we?” a voice whispered in the messenger’s ear as he fell to the floor. The other vampires scrambled over and now found themselves able to feed.

“I wasn’t sure what to do with this sword,” the leader of the energy vampires said. “It came into my possession under some rather unusual circumstances, at a time when I was going through some drastic changes. One might even say I was born the moment I devoured the soul containing it and claimed it for myself. I went searching for its origin, hoping to find some kind of identity for myself.”

The messenger lay helpless and twitching as the vampires fed.

“As it turns out,” the vampires continued, “it’s designed for killing your kind. The Builder, apparently holding some sentimentality for your kind, sealed it away. Until he inadvertently handed it to me.”

The colour had faded from the messenger, his skin and wings turned an ashen grey. The vampire leader pulled out the sword and stood up while the others stayed crouched over their prey.

“Don’t kill him,” the vampire once known as Thadwick said. “We need to find out what he knows about the Purity relic.”