

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 Yaresh, 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.