

## 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 Yareh 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 Akola?” 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.