

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 we 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.”