

Chapter 645

Who You Truly Are

Emir had known Jason before many of the tribulations that reshaped him from the soul out. Gods marking his soul, in the way overbearing deities would see as a reward. The Builder, using a star seed to try and force Jason into accepting slavery. The long, slow recovery from that, and his struggles against powerful political forces.

Emir himself was responsible for placing Jason into situations he should not have been. It was Emir's search for the Order of the Reaper that ultimately sent Jason into the astral space where he died. Now Jason was back, not just from another world but from death itself. Despite having seen Jason's formative experiences, Emir had been startled by how different Jason was.

At a glance, Jason was much the same; when they spoke over a water link connection, it was little different to the past. But water links did not transmit auras, and a brief conversation did not reveal that damage, waiting just a scratch beneath the surface. It was their brief encounter in the club that had started changing Emir's perspective.

Emir's intention had been to have a little fun with Jason, who was clearly terrible at maintaining a cover identity. Flashing his scars and proving his skills in a cage fight was the opposite of how to sell himself as an unassuming cook. When he met Jason, however, he had been startled. The strength and clamp-tight control of Jason's aura had meant that even Emir, a veteran gold ranker, could not see through him at all.

Even so, Emir had not realised the degree to which he no longer understood the manic, plucky outworlder he had once known. Jason had always put on a good front of being unconcerned about the powerful people around him. The gold-rank Emir had always known, though, that Jason's feelings were consumed with worry over that power imbalance. Jason was always in a manic scramble to somehow level the odds, be it through nonsensical behaviour or bold, unexpected moves.

From the way he strode through Emir's imposing cloud palace to his utter disregard for gold rankers, Emir could tell there was no façade at play; Jason was genuinely unintimidated. It was sitting across from Jason, looking into eyes that spoke of power waiting in the void, when Emir truly realised he no longer knew the man in front of him. Jason's aura was politely restrained, yet an ominous feeling teased at Emir's senses. It was like knowing there was a predator hidden somewhere in the bushes, waiting for a moment of vulnerability in which to strike.

"Tell me," Jason said in a voice of stone closing over a tomb. "Tell me about the messengers, Emir. Tell me what you want."

Emir suddenly felt that telling Jason anything was a very bad idea. Arabelle had warned him, but Jason's reaction was much worse than he imagined. He glanced at Humphrey, whose face revealed nothing. He reached out with his senses to explore Humphrey's emotions only for a hard wall to spring up in his way.

Jason's face showed no change for having blocked Emir, who suspected that Humphrey hadn't even noticed the high-level aura clash. Emir was startled that Jason was even capable of the feat. Blocking the senses of others in such a way was normally only taught to gold rankers. It wasn't an especially difficult technique for someone of that rank, if they had the right skill foundations, but the power, confidence and precision with which Jason executed it was intimidating.

"I've clearly approached this very wrong," Emir said. "We can do this another—"

"I said tell me," Jason commanded. His voice was soft but with an inexorable force at its core.

Emir pushed down his anger at being told what to do in his own house, knowing that it wouldn't be productive. He was not used to being the responsible one, which was Constance's job, but he was the older man and the higher-ranked one. He glanced at his wife, who nodded her approval. Emir then turned back to Jason who was watching him with those unsettling eyes.

"You're aware of the problems surrounding the church of Purity," Emir told him. "People all over the world are trying to figure out exactly when and why the original Purity was sanctioned by the other gods. The churches either haven't been told by their gods or are telling us they haven't. I do know the diamond-rank community has been looking into it."

"There's a diamond-rank community?" Humphrey asked.

"Diamond rankers are powerful," Emir said. "Their numbers are limited and things like distance and money are almost irrelevant as problems. They keep in contact with one another, most of them, and they barter in favours and rarities rather than money. I have more contact with them than most, but I've only seen glimpses and don't know exactly how they operate. What I do know is that they've been digging into what happened with Purity, and I know what they've found."

Jason didn't react, still watching Emir with a silent, unblinking stare. Emir waited only a brief moment for a reaction before giving up and continuing.

"They've asked me to leverage the networks that I use for treasure hunting to seek something out. I'm not the only person they deployed, not by any measure, but they want to cast as wide a net as they can without causing a commotion. For that reason, me and people like me aren't telling the adventurers we hire what they're looking for. When we get a lead, we give them the details we have and send them out without knowing what they're truly looking for, or why."

"That seems dishonest," Humphrey said. "Not to mention, inefficient. Adventurers deserve to go into any contract knowing everything they can."

"That's true when hunting monsters," Emir said. "Hunting treasure is a different game, and what I've just described is standard. Ask any teams that specialise in treasure hunting and they'll tell you the same."

"How do they know what to look for?" Humphrey asked.

"They don't," Emir told him. "Even I don't know what to look for. I'm just a middleman, passing on what clues I've been given."

"That doesn't sound reliable," Humphrey said.

"I'm not oblivious to that fact," Emir said with a chuckle. "All we can do is throw as many trustworthy adventurers at this as we can. I'm just asking for your team to be amongst them, and knowing more than the rest, at that. We're not even talking about sending you somewhere. It's just that if you happen to converge on a point of interest, I may ask you to make a slight detour to check something out. From time to time."

"And now is one of those times," Jason said, finally speaking. "Because it involves the messengers, doesn't it?"

"Yes," Emir admitted. "As I said, I'm not telling anyone what we're after. But I've received permission to tell you."

"From whom?" Humphrey asked.

"Diamond rankers," Jason answered, pre-empting Emir. "Someone told Emir, here, that I have some business with the messengers. He wants me to see what I can find about his mysterious goal while I'm at it."

"Yes," Emir said.

Jason continued to look at him, blank-faced, but at least with Humphrey, Emir could see his words having an impact. Jason felt more like another gold ranker, and a hostile one at that.

"Even the diamond rank community doesn't have an answer for exactly what happened to the god of Purity," Emir said. "Not one they're telling me, anyway. But there is a belief that it was related to something. A device, a substance, a process; we don't know

its nature. But whatever it is, it can achieve a goal as old as essence magic: cleansing the effect of monster cores."

Humphrey rocked back in his chair, eyes wide. Jason didn't move.

"You think this is what the messengers are here for," Jason said, less question than statement.

"Yes," Emir said.

"Why?" Humphrey asked. "Don't messengers look down on essence users as belonging to inferior species?"

"Power," Jason said. "Power and control. If you have a monopoly on turning core users into regular essence users, you're holding a hand down over the entire essence-using world."

"You could have all the people who regret using cores become able to train like adventurers again," Humphrey said in hushed tones.

"That's only the beginning," Emir said. "From an objective perspective, the difference between core and non-core users is negligible. But the idea of that difference being real is a cornerstone of society's upper reaches. Something like that could throw the levers of power into disarray, and that's assuming whoever controls this cleansing power is benign. If this power is real, the world will change, one way or another. The nature of that change will depend on where this power comes from, what is it and how it works. And, most importantly—"

"Who controls it," Jason finished.

"Exactly," Emir said.

"Jason," Constance said, speaking up for the first time since the discussion began. "We're just looking for adventurers. Lots of adventurers, of which your team would be one of many. That is what Emir meant when he said you would be on the periphery. Resolving this is not your responsibility. We're just looking for people we can trust."

"That might not be me," Jason said. "My judgement can be compromised when it comes to the dissemination of power. If I find something like that, I won't just obediently hand it over to whoever hired me. I'll do with it what I decide is best, and I haven't always been right about that."

"That's why it won't be you making that choice," Humphrey told him. "It will be us."

Jason turned to Humphrey, his expression finally softening.

"Are you making the call, team leader?"

"I am."

Jason nodded.

“Alright then.”

Jason got to his feet, Humphrey following suit.

“Always a pleasure,” Jason told Constance and Emir, but it was unconvincing since his tone still sounded like a threat. “I’ll see you again at the end of next week.”

“I’ll show you out,” Constance said.

“It’s fine,” Jason said. “I’ll portal directly.”

“You won’t be able to portal out of the palace,” Emir said.

Jason pulled the necklace holding his two amulets from under his shirt. One was his Amulet of the Dark Guardian, while the other was his shrunken cloud flask. Cloud stuff spilled out and formed a portal that filled with darkness that Jason stepped through. Emir watched the darkness vanish and the cloud stuff disperse, his eyebrows attempting to climb off the top of his head.

“How the fu—”

Unsurprisingly, the city of Yaresh had no shortage of parks. They featured expanses of thick, soft grass, dotted with lush plants, and vibrant flowers. After getting riled up by Emir, and then angry at himself for getting riled up and treating his friend like crap, Jason found a park and started meditating to resettle himself. It also gave him a chance to rest after he tapped into his astral gate to punch a portal through Emir’s cloud house defences. While his cloud flask absorbed most of the impact from tapping into that energy, even the little left over caused him to be shaken.

Jason lost track of time as he allowed his mind to quiet into an empty peace. He had learned many meditation techniques but he ignored them for the moment, seeking only pure calm. When he opened his eyes, the sky was a gorgeous sunset orange. In equatorial Rimaros, the sunset had been like flipping a switch off. They were now far enough south that it was still quick, but offered fleeting moments of glory at the end of the day.

Rather than leave in search of accommodation as the city passed into night, Jason closed his eyes again, returning to meditation. This time he practised a technique Amos had taught him, expanding his senses in such a way that didn’t project his aura in an easily detectable way. It was the most difficult form of aura manipulation he had learned, representing a more advanced technique than anything else he knew.

Learning the technique involved simultaneously concentrating his focus and a meditative relaxation of the mind, which left him feeling like he needed two heads. The

spirit attribute enhanced the mind in certain ways, including improved multitasking, but this was pushing his silver-rank abilities to the limit.

Much of the aura manipulation Amos was teaching Jason was normally reserved for gold rank. When those techniques relied heavily on raw power, Jason picked them up easily. When it was more about skill and he couldn't lean on his strength, it was much more of a struggle. Even if he couldn't master the techniques through a limitation in his rank or just his aptitude, grasping just the fundamentals would be a massive boon once he ranked up.

Jason slowly and carefully expanded his senses, making sure that his aura was undetectable to all but the most sensitive. In almost every adventuring scenario, acting so slowly would be fairly useless, but Jason continued to act with patience. Even if he didn't use what he was practising in the field for a decade, after he'd ranked up, he knew he was building the foundations of something amazing.

One of the things Amos had taught him was to pay more attention to the differentiation of his various senses. Most adventurers, Jason included, lumped their senses into two boxes: natural and magical. Neither of these was strictly correct, as even the 'natural' senses of sight, hearing, taste and touch were powerfully enhanced by magic.

The physical senses were also increasingly refined with each rank, as Jason could expand them into spectrums unavailable to normal humans. Mostly, though, he used that refinement to filter input. His mind didn't actively perceive things on the limits of the visual and audible spectrums unless they stood out for some reason, and he didn't process the bulk of the tastes and aromas wafting on the air. That saved him from nauseating experiences that normal people were mercifully spared from.

Magical perception was made up of two senses: the ability to sense magic and the ability to sense auras. All essence users understood there was a difference between them from an absolute perspective, but treated them as one from a practical perspective. This was as true for Jason as it was for most, although he did have an advantage in differentiating them, as his aura sense was much stronger than his magic sense.

Even so, Jason had rarely utilised them separately until Amos pushed him to do so. It was the first step in increasing what Jason thought were already highly refined senses. As he became increasingly proficient at using them separately, he discovered that doing so made them much more sensitive. This was the key to expanding his senses without what he now thought of as crudely shoving them with his aura. There was a lot of practise ahead of him, but even his early results had him excited.

Once again, Jason lost track of time. He fell into a meditative cycle as his senses expanded at a crawl, moving out centimetre by centimetre. His perception glacially expanded to encompass the park and he could sense the few people in it, late into the night.

This was the point where he realised it was the early hours of the morning, as everyone left in the park was engaged in behaviour he would rather not pry into, be it sketchy or amorous in nature. It was a familiar aura, though, that had his eyes snap open.

“Mr Asano?” Shade asked.

“It’s the outworlder’s aide, Benella. She has some other silver rankers with her.”

“You think she is here for you?”

“Yep.”

“I am somewhat concerned that she was able to find you.”

“I may be practising at hiding my aura as my senses expand, but my efforts are still sloppy and crude. To someone with sufficiently sensitive perception, I was closer to being a beacon than being hidden.”

“How are you going to react?”

“Well,” Jason said, “I see us as having three options. One, scarpers before they get closer. Two, try to turn it around and sneakily follow them. Three, fight.”

“The second option offers the greatest benefits,” Shade pointed out. “We could learn who this woman truly is. But the sufficiently sensitive perception you just mentioned would be a threat.”

“Agreed.”

“Of the remaining options, Mr Asano, escape is the more sensible approach. Fighting gets you nothing except showing this woman who *you* truly are.”

“I’m not going to lie,” Jason said. “That holds a certain appeal.”

“But it only holds consequences with no upsides, Mr Asano.”

Jason grumbled, but nodded his head.

“Alright, but we are officially hunting this woman back.”

Shade emerged from Jason’s shadow and Jason stepped into him, vanishing.