

Chapter 701

Developing Any Skill Takes Practise

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

“No?” Jason asked lightly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why?"

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

"It would pose a threat to even them?"

"Yep."

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

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

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

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

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

"Politics," Amos grumbled unhappily.

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

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

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

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

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

"We are," Jason told her.

"Can I expect further disruptions, then?"

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

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

"Hoping?"

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

Hana focused her attention on the portal for a moment.

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

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

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

"Of course they can," Jason agreed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jason nodded at the portal.

“Step though and find out.”

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

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

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

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

“You’ll deal with dying?” Hana asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Now?”

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

“Okay,” Jason said. “Anything else?”

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

“I’ll do my best. No promises.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 702

War Guilt Clause

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“He doesn’t trust you?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Asano gave Marek a long, assessing look before speaking.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Asano sighed before continuing.

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

“There is never an end to war.”

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

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

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

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

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

Asano smiled and gestured at his face.

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

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

“It’s time. Out you pop, chief.”

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

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

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

“I was merely doing as commanded.”

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

Jason’s gaze moved from Marek to Amos.

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

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

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

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

“The birthing tree?” Amos asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“From a messenger?”

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

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

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

Marek glanced at Jason, then back to Amos.

“He showed me mercy.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I am not a plant.”

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

“Please be serious, Jason Asano.”

Jason laughed.

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

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

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

He started patting the pockets of his tan shorts.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It was more like making a deal than—"

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

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

Chapter 703

Primary Purpose

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

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

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

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

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

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

"They don't deserve forgiveness."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"They don't look like plants."

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

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

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

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

"No, I'm cooking broccoli."

"What?"

"See? They're the worst."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jason leaned back in his chair.

"Do tell."

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

"What is it?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Near inert?"

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

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

"Precisely."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes," Shade said.

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

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

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

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

"Why would it stop?" Jason asked.

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

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

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

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

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

"And what is this magic?"

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

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

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

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

“Yes.”

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

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

“Is a water pistol?”

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

“She used authority for that?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Why does Gordon even have that potential?”

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

"You think I can't handle it?"

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

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

"Thank you, Mr Asano."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No, Mr Asano."

Chapter 704

Everyone Has a Price

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That is the current assessment,” Vidal said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No, Mr Ladviv. It does not."

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

"There is one other thing, Mr Asano."

"Go on."

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

"Not to me."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What else would there be, Mr Asano?"

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

"Mr Asano, I—"

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

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

Jason frowned and shook his head.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Or be very lucky.”

“Are you a lucky man, Mr Asano?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And the rest of your team?”

“That is up to them.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You have things to do here.”

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

“What are you expecting?”

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

“An equal that needs to be eradicated.”

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

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

“Everyone has a price, Shade.”

“And what is yours, Mr Asano?”

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

Chapter 705

Trust

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You know Dawn?”

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

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

“You worked together?”

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

“And you are?”

Jason burst out laughing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Allayeth’s sounded like a merrily trickling stream.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How is that working out?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No.”

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

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

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

“I wouldn’t put it so crudely.”

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

“And is that a threat?”

“Yes.”

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

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

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

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

“So, you think I’ll roll over?”

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

Jason bowed his head.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And how would I do that?”

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

Jason sat up straight, confusion on his face.

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

“I would have thought that was obvious.”

Jason laughed, shaking his head.

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

Jason rubbed his temples with one hand.

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

“Alright.”

“What?”

“I’ll go through.”

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

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

“I don’t always do the right thing.”

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

“Uh…”

She laughed.

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

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

Allayeth sighed.

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

Jason narrowed his eyes.

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

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

Jason continued to give Allayeth an assessing stare.

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

Allayeth smiled in spite of herself.

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

“You said you’d offer me two things.”

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

“And they are?”

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

“And the other thing?”

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

“A delicious sandwich,” she said.

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

“Yes.”

“You think I’m that easy?”

“Yes.”

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

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

“That’s absurd.”

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

“No. Yes.”

He ran a hand over his face.

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