

## 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.

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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.