

Chapter 709

Decorum

A large group of mostly very serious people were having a meeting in a room with a bouncy house floor. The attendees were looking at a blue orb sitting on a table.

“This device was delivered to us by a messenger from the, er, messengers,” said Musin Heath. “Accordingly, we don’t trust it at all.”

The Adventure Society director was behind the table with the Knowledge Priest, Ebson Jillet, who tapped the two boxes behind the orb. The smaller box had previously contained the orb, while the larger one had contained the first box.

“If the orb explodes or does anything unexpected,” Jillet said, “this box will absorb and contain it. It can even draw in poison gas, explosive force or a variety of other magical threats.”

“Using the orb is very simple,” Musin explained.

“Is it?” Jason asked. “I don’t think you’ve got it the right way up.”

Musin rocked the orb back and forth with his finger.

“I don’t think there’s any way to tell. I don’t think there is a right way up.”

“If you say so,” Jason said, sceptical but not pushing the issue. Musin continued his explanation.

“A trickle of mana will let you control it intuitively, like most magic items. Once I send a signal through it that we’re ready to communicate, that will allow Jes Fin Kaal to open a communication channel. I would ask that you refrain from speaking out while the channel is open. The exception being Mr Asano whose participation was a requirement of ongoing negotiations. She will only speak to him going forward.”

“Because they’re probably working together,” one of the gold-rankers said. He was unknown to Jason, acting as security for the government officials. “This man Asano is as suspicious as the messengers. He’s been hiding from us and keeping secrets. It’s fairly obvious he’s working with them and I don’t know why we haven’t already peeled the secrets out of him, now that he’s left his hiding hole. He was just using his aura to make a drink for gods’ sakes. None of us can move things with our auras. Only messengers can do that.”

Jason let out a weary sigh.

“What’s your name?”

“Ikola Goeth.”

“Are you suggesting that I’m a messenger Akola?” Jason asked lightly.

“Why not?” Ikola asked. “You’re an outworlder to my senses, but there was another outworlder in this city too. He turned out to be some magic snake egg planted by the messengers decades ago. There are still naga that came out of that thing hiding in the ruins of the city.”

“See, now that’s just frustrating,” Jason said. “The last guy who spoke up — I’m assuming he’s a mate of yours — got sucked up into a portal.”

Jason turned to Allayeth.

“Did you send him somewhere else, or just into a dimensional space?”

“Dimensional space,” she told him.

“That’s a little disappointing, I’m not going to lie. I thought you had a genuine offensive portal ability, like my mate Clive. Well, his is a teleport, but it’s pretty much the same.”

“Jason,” Allayeth said. “I think you may be getting distracted.”

“From what?”

“The man accusing you of having been planted by the messengers.”

“What? Oh, right. You should probably give him his friend back?”

A horizontal portal opened in the room and a gold-ranker fell out, bouncing comically on the floor. He was covered in welts visible through the shredded remains of his black clothing. As the man groaned feebly, Jason turned back to Ikola.

“Now,” Jason said, “I was just saying that you accusing me like this is frustrating because if I make a move to intimidate you into silence, it just makes your words seem true. Would I like to take a power sander to your face for accusing me of being on the side of the people who levelled the city and killed I don’t know how many people? Of course I would, that’s only natural. But that wouldn’t be productive. We’re all on the same side, and we need to reach an accommodation based on cooperation rather than—”

He paused as the injured gold ranker on the floor let out a loud groan of pain.

“—a pecking order based on the ability to perpetrate violence.”

Jason scowled at the fallen man.

“Bloke, you’re kind of undercutting me here. Get it together.”

Ikola got out of his chair and Jason did the same, the fallen man between them. The elven gold-ranker was half a head taller and dressed entirely in black. Jason was wearing a cream suit with a pink shirt from the collection tailored for him in Rimaros.

“Is nothing serious to you?” Ikola asked.

“You accused me of being a traitor,” Jason told him. “This meeting would get even more awkward if I took that seriously instead of in good humour.”

“You think you’re so special, don’t you?” the gold-ranker accused.

“Yep. And so do you, which I suspect is the real reason you’re so cranky. I’m going to sit back down and pretend you didn’t level the kind of accusation that gets people murdering one another. I’m hoping that you’ll also sit down, maybe engage in some self-reflection. Or at least just sit quietly. I understand that, as a gold-ranker, you aren’t used to being the guy standing at the back, but you’re here as a guard. In case you hadn’t noticed, there’s a who’s who of gold and diamond-rankers watching us squabble like children and it’s not doing any favours for either of our reputations.”

Ikola glanced left and right frowning in the unhappy realisation that Jason was right. He looked to be on the verge of stepping back but couldn't quite bring himself to let it go.

“You are a walking traitor flag and you get to attack someone, but I’m expected to sit down and keep my mouth shut?”

Jason opened his mouth to retort but stopped himself, letting out a sigh as his shoulders slumped.

“You’re right,” he said. “It’s not fair, and I’ve indulged in the kind of arrogant behaviour that not only have I done time and again, but I’ve criticised in others. So, how about I apologise to the guy on the ground for overreacting when he had a go at my friend, and you and I both step back and we let this meeting go forward?”

“Which neatly avoids the question of whether you’re a traitor when every indication is that you are.”

Jason looked at Ikola for a moment and then turned to the Adventure Society director.

“I tried,” Jason said. “De-escalation doesn’t come naturally to me, which I think everyone saw pretty clearly. But I tried, I really did. I don’t think we can move on to the next stage of this meeting with both him and me in the room, and I’m pretty sure you need me.”

The director did not look happy with Jason or Ikola, but it was Ikola he turned to.

“Mr Goeth, I must ask you to sit down and refrain from making further interruptions. If you feel that you are unable to do this, I must ask you to remove yourself instead.”

Ikola looked like he was going to argue but held his tongue. He helped the battered gold-ranker from the floor to his chair, frowning at the welts that should have already healed but remained bright red. He took his own seat with a dark glower and Musin turned his attention to Jason.

“And you, Mr Asano, I would advise you to be less provocative in how you act, as well as in how you react to others. I recognise that you have an outsized level of influence

relative to your rank and how you may feel the need to assert that influence when those of higher rank seek to suppress it. That being said, I think you will find that decorum will serve you better than acting out like a smug teenage aristocrat.”

The people in the room who knew Jason all winced, except for Arabelle. Jason didn't respond to the director and, instead, quietly retook his seat.

“Thank you, Mr Asano,” Musin said. “I will have you stand up again shortly once we activate the orb. As I was saying, prior to the interruption, once I signal that we are ready, the messengers will be able to open a channel for us to negotiate through. Jes Fin Kaal has made it clear that she will only negotiate with Mr Asano, whom I hope will take heed of my advice.”

Most of the room's occupants glanced in Jason's direction, but he showed no reaction to them or Musin's words.

“If there are no more interruptions,” Musin said, his tone indicating that it was not a question, “then we will begin.”

He reached out and touched a finger to the orb.

“It's done.”

The orb sat still on the table.

It continued sitting still on the table.

Emir surreptitiously checked his pocket watch and had his wrist slapped by his wife.

Jillet moved over to Musin and activated a small privacy screen in which they talked unheard by the room's other occupants, but watched by all. There was a minor visible component that blurred the area enough to prevent lip reading, but body language was still visible. Musin variously nodded, shrugged, shook his head and held out empty hands as he and Jillet spoke. Finally, Jillet deactivated the privacy screen.

“...yes, I'm sure it's on,” Musin finished, now audible to the room. His eyes darted back and forth and he slowly reached out to the orb as if that would somehow prevent everyone from noticing. His fingers brushed against it.

“It's definitely on,” he said to no one in particular. “I was sure it was, and it was.”

He was saved from the awkward moment by the orb which started emitting a soft glow.

“Right,” Musin said. “If you would stand in front of the orb please, Mr Asano?”

Jason got up and positioned himself in front of the table with a frown.

“This feels more like standing in front of a firing squad than I'm comfortable with,” he grumbled.

Musin reached out and touched the orb again. A hologram-like image of someone's head projected from the front of the sphere, slightly off-centre and tilted down. This gave Jason a view of the top of the head and one ear.

"What am I looking at?" the projection of Jes Fin Kaal asked. Musin quickly turned the orb so the projection rose from the top and the messenger's face became visible.

"It wasn't clear which way was up," Musin said. "You should consider marking them so people can tell."

"It doesn't matter," Jes Fin Kaal said, her gaze now locked on Jason. "So, you are their king."

"I'm no one's king, lady, and I refuse to believe you said that for any reason other than riling up the other people in this room against me."

She smiled.

"Not a complete idiot, then, which I appreciate. It was an open question, given the research we've done on you. I admit that I've been anticipating our meeting for some time."

"Personally, I wished you'd invaded with the next monster surge. Once I'm gold rank I could put you down myself instead of watching someone else do it."

"False machismo to make me think you're simple-minded enough to be led around by your own aggressive mindset? You can do better than that, Asano."

"I really can't. I actually am that simple-minded, so I talk about the films of Michael Dudikoff until people get distracted. People are starting to get wise to me, though: no one even asked me what a belt sander was."

Jason had never wondered what a snake would sound like if it laughed until he heard Jes Fin Kaal do it.

"I was told you would likely use irreverence and references to your home world in an attempt to disrupt my train of thought. You'll have to do better than that, Jason Asano."

"Alright. Two strongholds. That's the price."

"You want me to relinquish two more strongholds in return for your working with us?"

"No," Jason said. "You attacked us. You infested people with those parasites, which is a kind of horror even I have trouble imagining, and I've been through some stuff. You killed people, took their homes and everything that matters to them and now you're here to make a deal?"

"I don't think that you will let anger guide you. I'm sure you've been informed by now that the threat below your feet is greater than any presented by me. You need us."

“No, we don’t. With what you’ve done to this city, it’s better to pack everyone up, relocate and write the whole region off. It’s cheaper to contain the damage and rebuild elsewhere than clean up the mess you left behind.”

“I very much doubt the people in the room with you agree, Asano.”

“But you’re not talking to them. You made it very clear that you would only talk to me, so here are your options: One, you abandon—”

“This is a negotiation, Asano. I’m not here to listen to your ultimatums.”

“We aren’t negotiating yet, lady. I told you that two strongholds is the price, but I didn’t mean to get us working with you. That’s the price for me to even listen to what you want.”

“You think this tough-man act will work on me?”

“Nope. I doubt an axe to the head would work on you either, but if I get the chance, you’d better believe I’ll check. If you want me to listen to anything you say, empty two more of your strongholds and destroy them behind you.”

“It seems that I should have negotiated with the city officials after all.”

“Probably,” Jason agreed. “Feel free to do that. But if you’re sticking with me, you know the price. Don’t call back until it’s done.”

Jason slapped his hand on the orb and the projection disappeared. He turned to look at a room full of horrified faces.

“I thought that went pretty well,” he said.