

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.