

Chapter 711

Experiment

Jason went to the door of the meeting room and looked out but Lord Bynes was already gone. Being a monster core user didn't hurt his gold-rank speed and he had shot out like a rocket.

"Does he even know the way out? There was an elevating platform. It would feel weird to pause in the middle of a panicked flight to stop, calmly ride an elevator down and then bolt off in a mad dash again."

"He skipped the elevating platform," Emir said. Like Jason, he could sense the people in his cloud house. "He went out through a window."

Jason turned around to face Allayeth and Arabelle.

"Look," he said. "I played along, but can someone explain to me why we just ran that guy over the coals?"

"What did you do to him exactly?" Arabelle asked. "I've seen a lot of different kinds of fear — a lot — but what was coming off that man's aura was new to me."

"I've seen it," Allayeth said. "I've even felt it, but not like Lord Bynes. I'm finding my curiosity as to what lays beyond that portal of yours freshly aroused."

"Do try to control yourself," Jason told her. "You shouldn't let your curiosity be aroused in front of all these people."

"You say that," Allayeth told him, "yet you keep arousing it over and over."

"I'm not going out of my way to be arousing."

"I'm not sure I entirely believe that," Allayeth said. "There's only so arousing a person can be by accident, and given the frequency with which you are being arousing, I can only assume it is on purpose."

"I need you both to stop saying 'arouse,'" Arabelle told them.

"I think we all might need that," Clive added.

"Especially while he's standing next to my mother," Rufus said.

"I told you he was like that," Neil muttered.

"I wish I was like that," Travis mumbled, glancing at Gabrielle. She, in turn, was glaring at Jason.

"See," she said to her fellow priests and priestesses. "What did I tell you? Moral turpitude."

"I thought turpitude was a thing you used to clean boats," Taika said.

“It depends on the boat,” Jason told him. “I will admit, though, it does mostly make them dirtier.”

The Adventure Society director looked on in a combination of confusion and horror as the diamond-ranker making innuendos became the latest way the meeting went off the rails.

“I think,” he declared loudly, “that it is time to call this meeting to an end. I will discuss aspects of what is happening with the various interested parties in smaller group sessions. I will reconvene this meeting when it is appropriate or we see any kind of response from Jes Fin Kaal.”

The meeting broke up in short order. Rick Geller frowned as he watched Jason leaving with Arabelle and Allayeth, and got a slap on the back of his head from his girlfriend, Hannah.

“What was that for?” Rick asked, turning on her.

“I don’t know,” Hannah said. “But I’m pretty sure you deserved it.”

Rick glanced back at Jason, the gold-ranker and the diamond-ranker as they disappeared through the door.

“Yeah, probably,” he admitted in a resigned voice.

“Jason,” Arabelle said as they walked through the halls of Emir’s cloud palace. “What exactly did you show that man?”

“I’m curious as well,” Allayeth agreed.

“You said you’d felt that kind of fear yourself,” Jason said. “Where did you encounter something like that?”

“Every diamond-ranker has,” Allayeth said. “You’re silver-rank now, and soon you’ll begin to realise that once you approach the limits of silver-rank, you can’t just advance the way you have, training and pushing yourself. Monster core users can push through to gold, but that rather dead-ends them.”

“He’s not ready for that yet,” Arabelle pointed out. “Not quite.”

“That’s fine,” Allayeth said. “What we’re talking about is the transition from gold to diamond-rank, anyway. As you grow closer to the pinnacle of gold, you start to get an instinctive sense of something that lies beyond. Not diamond-rank itself, but what lies beyond that.”

“Transcendence,” Jason said.

“Yes. Do you know much about transcendence?”

“Oh, you pick up things here and there. The first magic item I ever got was transcendent rank, now that I think about it.”

Allayeth turned to him, wide-eyed.

“You’ve seen a transcendent rank item?”

“I’ve used a few,” he said casually as they stepped onto an elevating platform. “I kind of go through them, now that I think about it. It might be one of my things.”

“More than one?” Allayeth said faintly. “What did they do?”

“The first one brought me back from the dead the...”

His brow creased in thought.

“...I want to say the second time? Yeah, the second time. Took me back to my world while it was at it.”

“To the other universe.”

“Yep. That one was a consumable, so it was only ever meant to be a one-and-done. I had this magic door for rewriting reality and—”

“Rewriting reality?”

“I know, right? Thankfully, I’d just hit silver-rank; I’d have Buckley’s chance of remaking chunks of the planet at bronze-rank. Anyway, the Builder left this door so some muppet would come along — in this case, me — and fix reality after it had been left a bit janky by the last bloke with his job. The magic door would let the Builder worm his way into them, though, except that the Builder already tried that and I was having none of it. I wiped off the Builder’s control, gave myself the old five-finger discount and ninja’d the door for myself. Later on, the World-Phoenix gave me this dimensional bridge thing, but I accidentally smashed that one and the Builder’s door. I gave the old soul a bit of what-for and both items got broken down for parts.”

Allayeth looked at Arabelle who gave her a sympathetic shake of the head.

“Jason occasionally likes to push the limits of his translation power,” Arabelle told her. “I’ll translate later. For now, you were talking about transcendence.”

“Uh, yes,” Allayeth said, regaining her composure. “As I was saying, those of us who approach the peak of gold-rank start to get a sense of what lies at the end of the path. A state of being that no amount of advancement can achieve. A state that can only be sought out once every drop of mortal potential has been wrung out. The pinnacle does not lead to the next journey, but gives you the barest of qualifications to begin looking for where the next journey begins.”

“Moving beyond diamond-rank,” Arabelle said. “It is possible, then?”

“No,” Allayeth said. “And that is rather the point. To transcend, you have to go beyond not just the limits of mortality, but the limits of possibility. The glimpses of the wider cosmos you gain as you approach diamond-rank are soul-crushing. You don’t just learn how insignificant you are intellectually, but you truly understand. You comprehend it in its complete and utterly stark fullness, right down into the depths of your soul.”

“And that breaks people,” Jason said.

“It can,” Allayeth agreed. “For those who believe themselves important — and what gold-ranker doesn’t — it can, indeed, break them. We are specks of sand on a beach that goes on forever, lasting only an instant before blowing away on the wind. The very world we stand on exists only for a fleeting moment in an insignificant corner of infinity.”

The platform reached the bottom floor and they continued through Emir’s massive cloud palace. There was a bustle of activity as people came through to be tested for world-taker worms and processed for housing and food allocation. The mass of people instinctively moved around them without even realising they were doing it. Jason observed Allayeth’s aura manipulation producing the effect and took mental notes.

“The revelation of the cosmos and our place in it is too much for some, and they break. For others, it is a comfort to be a part of such grandness. It places the petty squabbles we all fight into perspective, revealing that they are, ultimately, meaningless.”

“I disagree, but go on,” Jason said.

“There are those for whom having the cosmos revealed does nothing. It has no effect at all. They are at one with themselves, who they are, and who they are not. Seeing their place in all things fails to change that. For those who are already in this state, moving from gold to diamond proves a relatively easy transition. For the rest of us, we have to try and reach that state. It doesn’t have to be forever, but we need to find that equanimity for at least a time in order to move beyond gold-rank.”

“And you did that,” Arabelle said. “As a scholar of the mind, I respect your ability to achieve that.”

“I spent years in isolation. Sometimes wandering the world, other times in uninhabited places, meditating for weeks or even months. Eventually, I found a peace through which I was able to surpass my previous limits. I’m not sure I could find that again if I tried. I know that fear. That dread that reaches into the core of you. It takes who you think you are and makes you realise that you’re infinitesimally smaller.”

She looked at Jason.

“What I want to know,” she asked, “is why I felt that same fear from Lord Bynes. He may be a gold-ranker, but he’s not even close to the peak. Even if he were, he wouldn’t

sense what I described. A core user that does is the extreme exception, usually master craftspeople. Bynes is very far from that, so how did you show him the entirety of the cosmos?”

Jason didn't answer immediately as they had reached the entrance to the cloud palace, moving through the waves of people. Going outside, Jason's aura shucked off the heavy rain as they walked on a path of stone slabs set into the mud.

“You know your friend Charist is listening to us,” Jason told Allayeth. “I'm not going to go giving up my secrets for free. I want information in return.”

“What do you want?” she asked, her voice sober.

“You have to tell me everything about the sauce that was in that sandwich.”

Arabelle slapped a hand over her face and Allayeth's eyebrows moved upwards.

“And I mean everything,” Jason said. “Where you got it, what it's made of, what is the process. Are there variants? How are the ingredients cultivated? In what conditions? Who made it? Did they grow the ingredients themselves? How is it stored? Is there a difference when—”

“I'm serious,” Allayeth said. “This isn't just about finding out something for a political purpose, here. We're talking about the fundamental mechanics of essence user advancement...”

Allayeth trailed off as Jason did something with his aura. The air around them shivered and the two women felt something lock into place.

“What is this?” Allayeth asked. “This isn't something you can do with a normal aura. This feels like a messenger technique.”

“It has elements of the way messengers use their auras,” Jason said. “It's something I've been working on. Essentially, it's an aura-based privacy screen. I based it on a lot of elements. Messenger techniques, certainly, but also examining how mine and Emir's cloud palaces obscure external senses. Plus, how gods secure their holy spaces. The inviolable places at the core of their temples.”

“How would you even understand how the gods do that?” Allayeth asked.

“I know you've felt it,” Jason told her. “You and your friend violated my home, pushing your way into the places your senses wouldn't penetrate. As much as I appreciate a good spicy sauce — and it's a lot — I haven't forgotten what you did. Now, can your senses penetrate this privacy screen without me noticing? I know you could smash through it, but can you weasel your way in?”

Jason felt a tingle on his aura senses.

“Maybe,” she said. “Not quickly, at least until I examine the technique you’re using some more.”

“Then I want your word that anything you manipulate me into giving up stays with you.”

“If I’m manipulating it out of you, why would you trust my word?”

“Call it an experiment. I like making friends and I don’t care for having allies. I like you, Allayeth, but my judgement isn’t always the best.”

Arabelle made a coughing sound. Jason gave her a flat look but she maintained an innocent expression, saying nothing.

“Friendship requires the extension of trust,” Jason continued. “I’m going to extend a little trust to you, Allayeth, and see where it takes us.”

“You’re an odd man, Jason,” Allayeth told him. “You dance around a point until the other person passes out from exhaustion, or you dive on it like a shark on an unfortunate sailor.”

Jason gave her a thin-lipped smile.

“There’s a gate,” he told her. “Through the portal. It connects what’s on the other side of the portal to the wider cosmos. I used that to show Bynes what you described peak gold-rankers seeing.”

“You showed him.”

“Yes.”

“You never left that room while he was inside that portal. And he was not in there for long.”

“Both of those things are true.”

She narrowed her eyes, peering at him.

“You have at least some measure of control on the far side of that portal.”

He didn’t respond, or even look at her as they walked along the path of muddy stone slabs.

“Who possesses the power I’m feeling through that portal?” Allayeth asked, more aloud to herself than in any expectation of an answer. “It’s not just some natural force you’re tapping into. There’s a will behind it. I can almost feel it, but your aura on the portal is masking anything I can identify. Why has the entity behind that power given you so much control over it? Why do they trust you?”

“The owner of that power doesn’t trust me,” Jason said, drawing a sharp look from Arabelle that Allayeth didn’t miss. Then he grinned.

“And that’s as much as you’re getting. It’s time you tell me why you have it out for Bynes.”

Chapter 712

Spanked

“Gormanston Bynes,” Allayeth explained, “is one of the most prominent members of a powerful political faction here in Yareh. It was his son, Calcifer, that you sent running off in a panic, but the father is the true threat.”

She was still walking from Emir’s cloud palace towards Jason’s with Jason himself and Arabelle Remore. They were keeping a leisurely pace while others hustled around them under magic umbrellas, regular umbrellas or a pointed longing for umbrellas. Jason’s aura was pushing aside any rain before it reached him or his companions.

“I first came across Bynes when I was working with the original refugee camp,” Arabelle said. “This was before the attack when we were scrambling to get any survivors out of the towns and into the city while keeping any world-taker worms out of the city. You remember the scramble to get supplies coming in and the logistics in place to do that efficiently.”

“I do,” Jason said. His cloud building had been the original screening centre before it was eventually moved to Emir’s.

“Bynes was pushing to get the funding for that cut. He was riling people up about the messenger threat, saying that funding should go to fighting the messengers.”

“Bynes and his faction are extremely focused on consolidating and expanding aristocratic power,” Allayeth explained. “They are also aggressively lacking in scruples regarding how their agenda is met.”

“Which usually means they’d be happy to feed puppies into a wood chipper,” Jason said.

“Can I assume that a wood chipper is a device for turning large pieces of wood into very small pieces of wood?” Allayeth asked.

“You can.”

“And I assume that placing small, adorable animals into such a device would remove a considerable amount of their innocent charm.”

“I would characterise that as accurate, yes,” Jason said.

“The main point,” Arabelle said, “being that they are willing to stoop to significant lows.”

“Like taking money from the refugee efforts,” Jason said. “Why would he make a move like that? It can’t make him popular.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised,” Allayeth said. “There are two things you need to know to understand Bynes. One is his political faction, and the other is that political faction’s agenda. The short version is that they are a cabal of merchant barons and old-money aristocrats. What they want is the ever-original money and power.”

“What makes them interesting,” Arabelle said, “is that while they do have combat-oriented people, they largely eschew the traditional power structure of personal power. Look at Ikola, a trained ex-adventurer, taking orders from Calcifer Bynes, a core user who’s never faced a monster in his life. The one he’s really serving is the father, not the son.”

“For the long version, let me start with context,” Allayeth said. “In any major population centre, political power is balanced between three forces. One power is the civilian government, be that a royal court or, in the case of most city-states, a ducal administration. It also frequently includes guilds and associations outside of the Adventure and Magic Societies, along with the noble houses and any other families of influence. Arabelle’s Remore family is a good example.”

“Strictly speaking, I married into it,” Arabelle said. “It’s how I manage to go five minutes without telling people my family runs a school.”

Jason snorted a laugh.

“The two societies, adventure and magic, make up another of the three major pillars of any city or country,” Allayeth continued. “The third force is the collective churches.”

“I’m going to go with the much lengthier explanation of the first force,” Jason said, “and guess that local government is the problem here.”

“Yes,” Allayeth said. “The problem is one of balance. When the three forces are in balance, things work more or less as they should. Corruption disturbs that balance, having various knock-on effects.”

“I’ve seen that before,” Jason said. The politics of Greenstone had a lot of rot, and Jason had seen dire consequences before that rot started being excised. From the exploitation of Sophie to Jason’s kidnapping to the disastrous expedition during which Farrah and many other adventurers died.

“In Yaresh,” Allayeth continued, “the civic administration is considerably weaker than the other two. This is almost entirely due to internal strife. Every one of the three groups has internal conflicts as they jostle for power, but a particular group amongst the city authorities has become a problem.”

“A bunch of rich pricks making trouble,” Jason said.

“Yes,” Allayeth said. “In this particular case, it is a collection of mostly aristocrats with exceptional wealth, along with a few merchant barons. They are known as the Aristocratic Faction. They own most of the land in the region and provide most of the jobs. They use that power and influence to co-opt their tenants and workers into certain ideologies. They take ideas that are easy to sell to large groups that the aristocrats themselves make sure are poorly educated. I’m talking about the usual tribalist and exclusionary ideologies, which they weld to other ideologies that help the aristocrats. Playing on simplistic ideals and commonly held prejudices, they’ve built a power base of loud and angry people who rabidly support their policies. The very policies that keep them poor and ignorant.”

“I’ve seen that before,” Jason said. “A lot of countries in my world have suffered through that. My own included.”

“What I just described is unpleasant,” Allayeth said, “but not, in and of itself, crippling. The problem is that the aristocratic faction has done something extremely unusual in that they have focused on power structures completely divorced from personal power. No adventurers, no magical researchers. Just money and political influence.”

“But political influence in Pallimustus is always tied to personal power,” Jason pointed out. “Royal families get stuffed full of monster cores so they can ostensibly stand at the top of society.”

“But that is not hard and fast,” Arabelle said. “Look at the Sapphire Crown Guild in Rimaros. They have more personal power than the royal family, but they’ve been instilled with an idea of duty.”

“Yeah,” Jason said, “but Rimaros is an exception. They put their people through the hard yards. You think Zara is some monster-core-eating waif?”

“Not the best example,” Arabelle acknowledged. “I already mentioned Ikola and how he was subordinate to Calcifer Bynes, despite being more personally powerful.”

“It’s part of an attitude the Aristocratic Faction promotes,” Allayeth said. “They are trying to normalise their strengths of money and influence as being more important than personal power. The problem is, they’re willing to undermine the structure they belong to. They undercut the city authorities, flatly lie about how and why they did it and use popular support to prevent any backlash. They blame everyone else while positioning themselves as the only solutions to the problems they themselves caused.”

“Why?” Jason asked. “What’s their end game?”

“The bureaucracy,” Allayeth said. “Each of the three groups brings their own strengths to the table, be it magic and monster hunting or communion with the gods. For civic administrations, it is the ability to run cities and countries. The day-to-day logistics of

managing tens or hundreds of thousands, even millions, is breathtakingly complex. Once that complexity reaches a point where very few people understand it but a city or kingdom absolutely relies on it, you've created nexus points of extreme power. Power that most don't even see until it gets exercised in ways they don't like."

"I see," Jason said. "They're riling up the population, using that to enact policies and force through appointments to put their own people in the nodes of bureaucratic power."

"Yes," Allayeth confirmed. "Everything from department heads like Bynes through to magistrates. Now, with the city fallen, you would expect them to back off. To let things rebuild before they resume their ambitions for control. Instead, they are using it as leverage. Their merchant barons are taking control of the private elements of the reconstruction; building firms, supply importers and the like. Their bureaucrats are taking control of the public elements. Regulations, seizures of private goods and resources in the name of the public good. And, of course, their people end up in charge of those resources."

"They are setting themselves up so that, when Yaresh is rebuilt," Arabelle explained, "they are in control of it."

"And that's why Bynes worked his way into that meeting?" Jason asked. "Because knowing, maybe even influencing whether Yaresh is rebuilt here or elsewhere is critical to their plans."

"More than that," Arabelle said. "If Yaresh gets saved from a fresh new disaster, the people behind that will have influence."

"You already do, Jason," Allayeth explained. "Your actions during the Battle of Yaresh, along with your conflicts with myself and Charist, have made your name known. The mysteries surrounding you only make you more interesting. I'm now convinced that Charist was manipulated into pushing you so that you would be undermined. The Aristocratic faction is a strong supporter of Charist, despite his ideologies being entirely centred around personal power hierarchies."

"How does that work?" Arabelle asked.

"Charist dislikes many of the responsibilities that come with his level of power," Allayeth explained. "When diamond rankers like myself or your father-in-law, Arabelle, settle permanently in a city, we take on certain responsibilities. The simple presence of our power has a ripple effect that goes unnoticed by the general population, but those in power are very aware of it. I suspect that you have some experience with this yourself, Jason."

"Unfortunately," Jason said.

“The Aristocratic Faction do a good job of relieving Charist of annoying tasks that he would otherwise have to deal with. People seeking him out for favours or knowledge. He lets the Aristocratic faction insulate him from that.”

“Will Charist act on their behalf?” Jason asked.

“Not directly,” Allayeth said with absolute assurance. “Charist is extremely enamoured of personal power hierarchies. He sees what they do for him as natural deference to his rank and would never grant them a favour for it, if only to avoid setting a precedent. But through their services to him, they’re able to filter the information he gets. I’ve been trying to get Charist more personally engaged in events, but to little success.”

“So that the way this faction painted me, Charist saw me as a threat to the city.”

“Yes,” Allayeth said. “Only when Charist’s approach was rebuffed effectively did he leave handling you to me. The Aristocratic faction, however, did not give up so easily.”

“Bynes tried to paint me as a traitor and it backfired,” Arabelle said. “Bynes’ lackey, Ikola, tried the same thing on you, Jason. They were there specifically to sow doubt and diminish our influence.”

“What we did to Bynes will make him a laughing stock,” Allayeth said, “but it’s only one hit in a long and complex fight against the Aristocratic Faction. A good hit, but far from a finishing blow. We need to curtail their power and then do something about the Magic Society’s corruption. If we can manage both of those, Yaresh has a good chance of coming through this with a functioning political system that will actually help rebuild it. But, as the Magic Society and Bynes are demonstrating, times of crisis are strong opportunities for those willing to exploit them at the cost of everyone else.”

“You keep saying ‘we,’” Jason said. “I hope you don’t mean we three.”

“No, I mean those of us that fight for the soul of Yaresh,” Allayeth said, then sighed. “It is a challenge that seems increasingly insurmountable.”

Jason let out a sigh of his own.

“I’m not great at intervening in political situations, as it turns out,” he said. “I’m pretty good at reading them, though. And what I’m getting from this is that it’s an internecine rat’s nest that I can only make worse by sticking my big dumb head into the middle of. But you two just went and stuck it in for me.”

“You didn’t have to let him into that portal,” Allayeth said.

“Don’t give me that,” Jason said. “Arabelle knew I’d do that the moment she suggested it. And you knew it too.”

Allayeth glanced at Arabelle.

“What makes you think she was so confident?”

“Because she knows me,” he said, then also turned his gaze on Arabelle. “Don’t you, Mrs Remore? Why don’t you tell her why I did it?”

“Because I wanted you to,” Arabelle said. “I shouldn’t have done that. You’re right; involving you in the ground-level politics was a mistake. Given who and what you are, the circles you travel in, we should be treating you more like a diamond-ranker. Unless you know the local situation as well as Allayeth, here, you shouldn’t be involved.”

“Honestly,” Jason said, “it’s actually kind of great to see you make a mistake. You’ve always been this sage-like figure, talking me through every dumb thing I’ve ever done. It’s nice to see that you can stuff up, too.”

“I guess I shouldn’t apologise, then,” Arabelle said.

“No, you should definitely apologise. I’m caught up in this Bynes nonsense, now. His people will probably come after me.”

“I think they may not,” Allayeth said. “The Bynes family is not a loyal breed. Depending on how much his humiliation hits the father’s reputation, he may cut the son out and move on. Not from the family, but you can expect Calcifer to become society wallpaper, seen and not heard. I think it’s more likely that the Aristocratic Faction leave you be. They know you’re not a soft target, now, and you have too many mysteries. One of them just bit back, and smart political players don’t pit themselves against the unknown if it poses any real threat. Not unless they have to. They probed and got bitten for their trouble. They’re more likely to leave you be than risk making you an enemy.”

“Well, that sounds nice,” Jason said. “I just don’t know if I have the kind of luck where the bad guys have a go, get spanked and then cut their losses.”

Chapter 713

Better Ambitions

In the empty void of a dying universe, one lush green and blue planet remained. Shielded from entropy by magic older than the ancient universe itself, some of the Builder's most powerful agents prepared to move it to a fresh, young reality. In a dimension ship, floating far enough from the planet to not fall into its orbit, a collection of prime avatars were watching. Each avatar belonged to a different member of the Council of Kings, the closest thing the messengers had to central leadership.

What the avatars were watching was an army of the Builder's most powerful tools, the massive golems called world engineers, orbiting the planet. The avatars observed as the world engineers wrapped the planet in threads of intrinsic-mandate magic, like a spider wrapping up captured prey.

Along with the avatars, the observation room of the dimensional ship contained Erigo Fin Desca, the Builder's new prime vessel. After Shako was taken by the Sundered Throne, the Builder had finally chosen his replacement. Erigo had originally been a messenger and still looked like one, but with heavy modification by the Builder. His wings were gleaming silver metal and his skin looked and felt like cold alabaster. His eyes were orbs of amber glass and his hair was entirely absent. His toga-like clothes had no fabric, being made entirely of tiny, interlocked shards of metal. With hues ranging from coppery reds to ocean blue sapphire, they sparkled in glimmering waves of colour.

One of the astral king avatars was not watching the planet through the transparent wall of the observation deck of the spaceship-like dimensional vessel. Instead, he was looking over Erigo's clothes. This was the avatar of the astral king Jamis Fran Muskar, and he stood out from the other avatars, even compared to Erigo. Jamis was the only avatar whose wings had been completely absorbed into his body, making him look like a seven-foot-tall celestine with dark copper hair and eyes. Messengers, astral kings included, rarely hid their wings. He was also the only person in the room standing on the floor instead of floating over it. He wore shoes where the others had sandals or bare feet. Instead of diaphanous robes or draping togas, he wore fitted clothes in sober colours.

"How do you prevent pinching and chafing?" Jamis asked Erigo, still peering at his clothes. "Do you use magic, or perhaps some manner of conventional lubricant? So many of my fellows overlook the sensory pleasures once they become astral kings, but oiling oneself up is a delightful indulgence. All the better if someone does it for you."

“There are more important matters at hand than self-indulgence and the clothing choices of the Builder’s new vessel,” a woman told him. She was the prime avatar of Vesta Carmis Zell, the astral king whom Jes Fin Kaal served. Jamis turned to look at her, saying nothing. She held his gaze for only a moment before lowering her eyes. Jamis smiled slightly, then turned his attention to the planet outside.

“When this task is complete,” Jamis said, “the price is paid. Zithis Carrow Vayel will have fulfilled his debt to us.”

“His name is the Builder,” Erigo corrected. “He is not one of our kind anymore.”

“Our kind?” Jamis asked. “Do you consider yourself a messenger still, Erigo Fin Desca?”

“I am more a messenger than you, Jamis Fran Muskar. The astral kings are no longer messengers.”

Jamis tilted his head, examining Erigo as if he was a painting.

“You are part of the Unorthodoxy,” Jamis surmised. “Or you were, perhaps, prior to assuming your current position.”

“I was,” Erigo admitted. “I have moved on. There is little point fighting an oppressor that can turn you into a mindless drone and send you to fight your own allies.”

“We should destroy you, traitor,” one of the other astral kings said.

“Oh, don’t bother with our little friend, here,” Jamis told him.

“He thinks because he serves the Builder now that he—”

Jamis cut the astral king off, turning to look at the man.

“I said don’t bother with our little friend, here.”

Jamis raised an eyebrow to question if the astral king was done talking. The man stayed silent and bowed his head slightly, earning a friendly smile from Jamis.

“See?” Jamis asked the others. “We’re all friends, here. Erigo Fin Desca has told us himself that he has left the Unorthodoxy behind. Perhaps we can even bargain some of the Unorthodoxy’s secrets out of him, now that his loyalty lies elsewhere. If nothing else, it would not do to antagonise the Builder while he is still in the process of moving our planet for us.”

“Wise,” Erigo said. “You have received a fine reward when all you did was provide some low-level ritual magic.”

“You truly have forgotten yourself as a messenger,” Vesta Carmis Zell told him.

“Adapting our magic so that the lesser species can use it was a task completely below us. Having our ritualists lower themselves to do so cost them dignity, which is more precious than Zithis Carrow Vayel can understand.”

“I have told you his name,” Erigo said. “I will not remind you again.”

“We apologise,” Jamis said. “Please excuse us, Erigo Fin Desca. We have internal issues to discuss, and I promise more civility when we speak again.”

“I will go and supervise the proceedings directly,” Erigo said. “See that civility is maintained the next time we speak or this planet goes nowhere.”

Jamis gestured and the transparent wall rippled like the surface of a pond. Erigo floated through, accelerating swiftly in the direction of the planet. When he was gone, Jamis turned on Vesta.

“I recognise that you don’t have any interest in our actual goals on Pallimustus,” he told her, “but you would do well not to antagonise the Builder’s servant. It is not yet time to make the Builder our enemy, and while you may not care about that. . .”

Jamis walked over to Vesta.

“...I do,” Jamis finished. He stared up at Vesta who would have stood taller than him even if she wasn't floating.

“Every astral king in this room,” Jamis continued, “other than you, Vesta Carmis Zell, is focused on our larger goal and not some personal project.”

“You have no say over my agenda or my actions,” Vesta shot back.

“That is true, so long as you do not take something that is not a problem to us and make it one.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your nascent astral king?”

“You mean the Asano boy? How do you know about him?”

Jamis responded with a laugh.

“I need him for the moment,” Vesta said. “I will kill him when that need is done.”

“I would recommend against it,” Jamis said.

“He has to die. He’s turning into an astral king. He has already started replacing my mark on the souls of my messengers.”

“So? This council represents the strongest of the astral kings. There are many others, and even a few powerful eccentrics who have declined to be part of our little group. They are no problem to us, so what do we care if their number grows by one?”

“But he is not a messenger.”

Jamis laughed again.

“I forget how young you are, Vesta Carmis Zell. I do not fear the rise of another original.”

“Original? What does that mean?”

“It does not fall to me to teach you history.”

“Asano threatens to become more than just an astral king. He claims domains like a god and employs intrinsic-mandate magic.”

“An astral king with their own unique abilities?” Jamis asked, clutching his hands in front of him. “That’s never happened before, whatever shall we do?”

“You mock me, but if left to his own devices, he can become a powerful enemy.”

Jamis laughed once more.

“Every person here is an enemy to everyone else in this room, yet we work together regardless.”

“You think Asano will work with us?”

“Perhaps. Forever is a very long time to say something will never happen. But, for now, his concerns are too small for the likes of us to care about or obstruct. With the exception of yourself, of course.”

“And if his concerns grow larger?”

“Then it will be in concert with his power. He might have the strength to be a challenge to your agenda, Vesta Carmis Zell, but you are the one who chose to pursue a separate goal from the rest of us. You might find yourself in a position where he has the strength to cause you trouble, but that is not the case for the rest of us. By the time he is powerful enough to fight for the purification artefact, it will already have been found and claimed. Preferably by us. He also has little interest in it. Like you, his goals and ours move in different directions.”

Vesta narrowed her eyes.

“How do you know so much about him?”

“You said it yourself: he is a potential threat. Only a fool would ignore that, so I took an interest. And, as it turns out I agree with you; he is a threat, but only a potential one. Should his interests and ours clash once he has enough power to be worth dealing with, then deal with him we must. But if we went around annihilating every potential threat, our entire species would spend their entire lives roaming the cosmos, smiting silver and bronze-rankers. We’d have to start wiping out planets just to save time. That, I’m sure you’d agree, would be more trouble than it’s worth.”

“Asano is different. He isn’t just some ordinary threat.”

“He is different, yes. The confluence of events, circumstances and powers that came together to shape him is extraordinary. But the cosmos is far more vast than you can imagine, Vesta Carmis Zell. At this very moment, there are more people with equally

extraordinary stories than your mind is capable of comprehending. Let me assure you that the way to deal with these people is to leave them alone.”

“If you know so much, do you know what happened to the diamond-ranker you all saddled me with?”

“Yes,” Jamis said. “And since his killer's agenda does not interfere with ours, I will leave the matter alone. If you want to pursue it, that is for you to do on your own. But, as with Asano, I recommend you follow my lead and let the issue lie.”

“Even if I was willing to swallow my pride over a jumped-up silver-ranker, I still have need of him.”

“Jumped-up silver-ranker? A moment ago he was a terrible new astral king ready to bring us all down with his unheard-of powers. You need to settle in your own mind if you're dealing with a genuine threat or an insignificant bug who has come to unlikely prominence. He can't be both.”

“For now, he is the latter,” Vesta said. “Left to his own devices, he will become the former.”

“Then I advise you to leave him to his own devices. People like Asano, who find themselves at the crux of great events, have a habit of enduring everything thrown at them and coming back stronger. And those who placed them in the crucible are left forgotten in the ashes of history. Asano is not a threat to the agenda of anyone in this room except for you. You are more interested in your personal hobbies than our collective interest and that is your prerogative. Asano is only a problem if you make him one, and none of us will interfere if you make that problem yours. But if you make it mine, then my first course of action will be to feed you to him and see if that solves it.”

“You would choose him over me?”

“You are the one who called him a future threat, and you were right. Today, you are a member of this council and he is some essence user that I can ignore. A hundred years from now, you will be in the exact same place you are now, but where will he be?”

“A century from now I will not be in the same place,” Vesta insisted.

“Right, your little hobby. Do you really think another soul forge will make that much difference?”

Vesta's eyes widened for the slightest moment before she regained her composure.

“Oh yes,” Jamis said. “I'm fully aware of what you're after, Vesta Carmis Zell; I just don't care. I will give you my advice anyway, knowing full well that you will ignore it: Find better ambitions. Stop scavenging for power outside the group and turn your efforts to

seeking out the purification artefact. Becoming a critical player in our greater plans will serve you better than carving your own path.”

“Of course you would say that.”

Jamis laughed.

“I am biased, it’s true. But my advice stands. Asano has made an unreasonable demand of your Voice of the Will. Use it as a chance to withdraw and restrategy without losing face.”

Vesta narrowed her eyes again.

“You’ve been paying close attention.”

“No, Vesta Carmis Zell, I have not. My information comes from paying a regular amount of attention without you ever noticing. Perhaps you should dwell on the ramifications of that when considering my advice.”

Chapter 714

The Instinct to Kneel

Inside Jason's soul realm, Jason and his team were sorting through the massive amount of loot they had picked up during the Battle of Yaresh. With both Neil and Jason having loot powers, there was more than a little of it. They were in the shadow of the central pagoda, in a courtyard where items were sitting in a massive pile.

This was not the first session of sorting through the pile, or even the first pile. Items were sorted into things the team wanted now, things they would keep until they were gold-rank and could use them, and a donation pile. This was the largest collection by far, with items donated for use in the restoration efforts where possible, or sold to fund it where not.

"I like having a flight item, don't get me wrong," Neil said as he patted his new belt. "It still doesn't seem fair that Humphrey got all the cool items. He even got another die for the dice set that modifies his summons. He didn't even use them in the fight."

"Yes, because what that battle needed was even more summons," Belinda said. "We could have distributed pamphlets to all the adventurers to explain which summons to attack and which ones to not attack."

"Lots of people used summons," Neil pointed out.

"Not a whole contingent of them," Jason said. "How many do you call up these days, Humphrey?"

"Twenty," Humphrey said. "Some of the rolls on the new die can change that, though."

"I would have loved to get my hands on that amulet that strengthens conjurations," Jason said. "I'll admit that Hump's armour and swords are more important than my cloak and shadow arms, through."

"As if you didn't have a stupidly strong amulet already," Belinda pointed out. "Not all of us have amazing items that grow stronger as we do."

Jason, Clive and Neil had the decency to look sheepish. Jason had the cloud house and his amulet, while Neil and Clive both had items claimed during the Reaper trials before Belinda joined the team.

"I want to know what Jason took from the diamond-rank messenger," Sophie said.

"Diamond-rankers drop diamond-rank items," Jason pointed out. "I can hold them for only a few seconds before my body has a negative magic reaction. I had to keep them all in my soul realm."

"We're in your soul realm," Clive pointed out.

“Fine,” Jason said. “There is some stuff I'm looking into maybe using, to be honest, but it's all on the backburner while we deal with everything else. But if you really must—”

“Mr Asano,” Shade interrupted, emerging from the shadow at the base of the wall. The whole team started jeering.

“You set that up so you wouldn't have to tell us,” Neil accused.

“No, but I'll keep that in mind for the future,” Jason said. “What is it, Shade?”

“The messenger strongholds, Mr Asano. The messengers look to be abandoning two of them.”

Jes Fin Kaal watched from atop a domed tower as the messenger forces poured into the stronghold, consolidating their forces from the two abandoned locations. Another messenger flew up to join her in floating just over the dome. Hess Jor Nasala was only silver-rank but she had come to rely on him as her chief assistant and mouthpiece.

“The commanders continue to voice their objection to abandoning two more fortresses,” Hess informed her.

“I am aware of their concerns.”

“They have asked me to warn you that it will leave us in a strategically unsound position should events underground not go as we intend.”

“Strategic position is irrelevant. If we do not get what we want from the natural array, there is nothing else here for us. Once affairs below ground are settled, whatever the outcome, we leave.”

“They have further asked me to point out that if the servant races accept your terms only as a ruse to launch an attack, our position is compromised with only two remaining defensive positions.”

“They won't,” she assured him. “I've made sure their mediocre ritualists have enough information to confirm the threat to their city. The only reason they would compromise their chances of saving it by attacking us is if they intend to evacuate and give up on the region entirely. We still have informants enough in the city that I will learn their intentions with more than enough time to respond. But I believe that the concerns of the commanders go beyond the strategic, do they not?”

“Your insight is accurate, Voice. I believe the questions of strategy are to avoid reprimand for questioning your ideological soundness.”

Kaal's slight smile didn't reach her eyes.

“They are unhappy over striking a bargain with the servant races.”

“Yes, Voice. I must confess that I am also uneasy at the proposition.”

“And why is that, Hess Jor Nasala?”

“Because it begs the question of what can they do that we cannot do ourselves? If they are lesser, why must we rely on them?”

“This is not a new question. You know the answer. If our people descend, they become tainted. It is not that the servant races can endure it because they are superior, but because they are already tainted themselves. The magic down there is able to stain the pure souls of messengers, but servant races are tainted already. That is how they endure. There is nothing new about sending servant races on tasks that are below us in places we do not wish to go.”

“But this is different,” Hess told her. “We are not just instructing our slaves to do our work for us.”

“No,” Kaal agreed. “We sent in our slaves and they lacked the will.”

“Which means that we are not telling them to do as we bid. We are asking, and that is what has left so many of us, including myself, unsure about this course of action.”

“You worry that we are putting the servant races on a level with ourselves by negotiating.”

“Yes, Voice. That is our concern.”

“Tell me your thoughts on Jason Asano.”

“He is... troubling. He is not one of us, yet he also is, in the ways that matter. So much of what makes us superior is shared by him. And he is an astral king, or close to it. I felt his aura myself and...”

“...and?” Kaal prompted.

“I felt the instinct to kneel,” Hess confessed.

Kaal nodded.

“He is not below us, yet he is not *of* us,” she said. “It means that we are left with three reactions to choose from. One, we can deny and destroy him as an aberration. Two, we can accept that he actually is one of us. Or three, we can acknowledge that we are not the only superior beings.”

“The overwhelming consensus is that the first option is the correct one, Voice.”

“I happen to agree. But how would you do it? Mah Go Schaat tried to kill him and fell dead at his feet. Do you know how? Can you be certain you would not share the same fate? Would you be willing to fight him, Hess Jor Nasala?”

“No,” Hess admitted. “I would not.”

“Jason Asano will die. We will have him walk into the fire of his own accord, serving our ends even as he meets his.”

“But is not manipulating him instead of dominating him a form of acknowledgement?”

“Yes, but in truth, we have acknowledged him many times. You, yourself just said you would decline to fight him, and that decision would be a wise one. You saw the frenzy he put our people in during the attack on the city. You saw the ragged gold-rankers after they desperately escaped his pyramid fortress. We acknowledge others all the time, Hess Jor Nasala. Great astral beings. Gods.”

“He is neither a god nor a great astral being. He’s a silver-ranker.”

“Yet, in defiance of everything we understand about astral kings, he is one of them. He is an enemy there is no shame in acknowledging, and there is no greater glory than destroying a worthy enemy. Especially when doing so gives you exactly that which you seek. Return to the commanders and tell them that if any amongst them have no need for glory, they may come and discuss it with me. If any of them accept that offer, prepare a list of replacements for me to approve as they will not be coming back.”

The next large meeting to take place in Emir’s cloud palace had several differences from the last one. The floor didn’t bounce, and the government delegation had undergone some personnel changes. Calcifer Bynes was absent, as were his guards, Ikola and the one whose name Jason hadn’t picked up before Allayeth had thrown the man into a portal. In the place of Bynes was another elf who looked much the same, but older.

The vast majority of the Aristocratic Faction in Yaresh had gained their ranks through monster cores. As a group, they valued money and political influence over personal power, but there was no escaping the fact that most of Pallimustus disagreed. This meant that any aristocratic family without standard-bearers to wield traditional forms of power would fall into irrelevancy.

For the Bynes family, the chief standard bearer was Gormanston Bynes. The father of the man who had left the previous meeting in such an undignified scramble, he was the new lead representative of the Yaresh civic administration. Unlike his son, he had no title; all he required to maintain his place in society was his name.

Gormanston Bynes had not a trace of monster core within his aura. He was not as pretty as his son, despite having the same gold-rank. Where ranking up had given Calcifer the elegance of a palace, his father had the blunt, stark beauty of an impregnable fortress. A weathered fortress, with the signs of aging that took an extremely long time to show on a gold-ranker.

Gormanston was taller than his son with a broad frame that exuded speed and power. Unlike Neil, whose clothes played down his physique, he was an elf that showed

off a physicality that was rare for his people. From his dress to his gait to the way he sat in a chair, Gormanston Bynes looked like a coil waiting to spring.

“So, that’s the dad,” Jason said from within a privacy screen. Another difference in this meeting was that the various groups were each under privacy screens. Following the messenger acceptance of Jason’s terms, the various stakeholders were all looking to serve their various agendas. Jason hoped that most of those agendas involved saving the city.

“That’s him,” Allayeth said. She and Jason were their own little group at the front of the room with the rest of Jason’s team at the back.

“He looks more serious than his son,” Jason said. “Are you sure he won’t be cranky about what happened to Junior Bynes at the last meeting?”

“I am. From what I know of the man, he’ll be thankful for weeding out weakness. He has other children, and I’m surprised he came in person instead of sending one of his daughters. I imagine whatever he managed to get out of Calcifer about what’s on the other side of your portal intrigued him.”

Jason gave her a side glance but she maintained an innocent expression.

“Yes, I’m also intrigued,” she admitted.

“We can talk about it after the meeting,” Jason said. “If I’m too important to kill, I might be open to a little show and tell.”

They took their seats as Emir filled the room with cloud furniture. The director of the Adventure Society, Musin Heath, was once more at the front. He took out the box containing the box containing the communication orb, releasing the seals that prevented any spying by the messengers via the orb. He set the orb on the table and glanced surreptitiously at Jason. Jason gestured subtly with head gestures and Musin turned the orb back and to the side, adjusting until Jason gave him a nod.

“You realise that it hasn’t gone unnoticed that only you, out of everyone in the room, can tell which way is up for the messenger’s magical device,” Allayeth told him.

“Anyone who knows anything is already aware that, magically speaking, I have more in common with the messengers than with anyone on our side.”

Every privacy screen in the room shattered simultaneously as an overwhelming aura settled over the room.

“It’s not just magically speaking,” a disembodied voice spoke.

“Dude, I’m in a meeting,” Jason said. “Also, now I have to explain the context of what you just said to everyone here if they want to understand it, and we were all using privacy screens for a reason.”

"I just thought I could contribute," the voice said.

"That's a bucket of horse manure and you know it," Jason said. "Don't come in here with your half-arsed power-plays."

"What's a horse?"

"The bottom half of a centaur, now sod off. I'm expecting a call."

"Would it help if I was here?"

"No! I'm pretty sure they hate your lot more than they hate me."

"That's true," the voice said. "If you need anything, though, just ask. We're all quite keen to kick them off our world."

"Yeah, because that's totally why you're making a spectacle of yourself."

"That's rich, coming from you."

"Yeah, well... shut up. Look, the blue ball is flashing; I have to take that."

"Fine," Dominion said and his presence faded away. This left a room full of people staring at Jason as the communications orb gently strobed.

"He totally knows what a horse is," Jason complained.

Chapter 715

Acceptable Terms

Jason looked around the room, then focused on the gently strobing blue orb.

"Is no one else going to...?" he asked. "I'm just going to go ahead, then. If the evil angel sorceress thinks we're screening her calls she might get cranky with the negotiations."

Jason stood up and awkwardly slinked over to the communication orb on the table. When he reached out and touched it, a projection of Jes Fin Kaal appeared over it.

"G'day," Jason said. "How've you been? Oh, right, you've been moving. That always sucks. It's why I keep my house in a bottle and just take it with me. That being said, it's always being used these days to screen for apocalypse worms or feeding homeless people, and those are both your fault, so... I'd appreciate you being less evil, I guess?"

"Are done talking nonsense?" she asked.

"No," Jason said through laughter. "I'm really, really not."

"I have met your demands, Asano. It is now time that you listened to my proposal."

"Yeah, that's fair," Jason said, calming down. "I said I'd listen if you did the thing and you did the thing. So, let's hear it."

"The natural array deep underground is unstable. You know this as well as we do."

"I also heard that was your fault. You were messing about with forces you don't understand."

"I understand them perfectly well, Jason Asano."

"Oh, you didn't mess up and turn the natural array into a very slow time bomb that sends all your messengers squiffy? It sounds like you don't need us at all. Should I just hang up?"

"There is always the potential for unforeseen complications with magic, Jason Asano."

"Yeah, that's true," Jason acknowledged. "Your track record doesn't exactly fill me with confidence that you have a solution, though."

"The only reason anything went wrong in the first place is that we were unable to complete our task before we were forced to flee the array's effects. All we need is for someone less susceptible to the array's effects to complete what has already been started."

"To summarise, then, you messed up your evil plan, the after-effects of which threaten to destroy this city and a good chunk of the landscape around it. You propose that we finish your plan for you, giving you everything you want?"

"And saving the city."

"What's left of it after another of your evil schemes, yes. You understand why we aren't excited about the choice between annihilation and giving you everything you came here to get."

"Yes," Kaal agreed. "But as you say, one of your options is annihilation. That means you have to act on the alternative, however unpalatable."

"Unless I take the unmentioned option three," Jason pointed out. "I walk away. I know that the people in this room will still want to work with you, but can you work with them? Will all your little indoctrinated drones stand for that?"

"It would seem that the messengers in your possession have been talkative. Since it no longer matters, I will ask this: was Marek Nior Vargas a part of the Unorthodoxy?"

"The what? Unorthodoxy? I thought your kind didn't have religions. If you're willing to put some information about that on the table, I might be willing to make some extra concessions. Actually, I do have my own messengers, as you pointed out. I might just go ask them."

"Then do so, but we are here for a reason. You do not want the city destroyed and you do not want to deliver to me what I want. But the nature of compromise is that you make accommodations to get what you want, Asano. Stomping your feet and demanding to get everything while giving up nothing is a child's tantrum, not a negotiating position."

Jason nodded reluctantly.

"Let's start by determining exactly what you want from us, then."

"I need a force of your essence users to descend to the natural array and use a device that will stabilise it. I need you to lead it, regardless of rank make-up because, as you said, my people will not tolerate trafficking with someone who is not one of us."

"Are you trying to isolate me from my own people?" Jason asked, his voice amused. "I'm not one of you, Voice, and I don't think your minions would like you saying I am. There are ways in which I'm like you, certainly, but your kind has too many flaws. You're inferior."

"You think you can anger me?"

"I think that you were once a freshly budded messenger, just like the rest of them. I think you may have moved past the indoctrination but there are still some hooks left in you. That kind of treatment never goes away, not completely. It becomes part of you."

"You have a few stolen scraps of knowledge and think you know us?"

“Oh, I’ve looked deep inside your kind, Jes Fin Kaal. Did your astral king not tell you? She has to know because she felt it. She felt me reach inside her messengers and remake what they are. If Vesta Carmis Zell didn’t tell you that, she sent you into this negotiation blind. And if she’s been keeping secrets from you, I think we both know that she’s hung you out to dry.”

“My astral king shares and hides what she wills; it is hers to do so. If there are secrets she keeps from me, it is not my place to know them. You shall not provoke me this way.”

“Won’t I? You’re not eating up the simple lies anymore, Voice. You can’t be if you want to carry out your function with even a modicum of competence. Which means that you know the questions and see the contradictions. There’s something wrong and you can feel it, but you’re too afraid to ask.”

“I have no interest in this discussion,” Kaal told him. “If you cannot keep to the negotiation at hand, there is no point continuing this conversation.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “You wouldn’t believe the truth anyway. It’s hard to throw off a shackle when you think it’s a lifeline, and it will take more than me to convince you. Instead, let us talk details.”

Jason and Kaal went over the proposed operation in detail. A mixed group of silver and gold-rankers would descend into the access shaft that the messengers had been keeping the surface dwellers away from. They would then need to navigate whatever state the underground denizens were in from the effects of the unstable array, set up a device provided by the messengers and keep it secure for as long as it took to activate.

“And you’re confident that whatever kinks made the device go wrong in the first place have been worked out?” Jason asked.

“There were no ‘kinks,’ in the device. The only issue was our inability to stay and keep it secure long enough to take full effect.”

“Even if that’s true,” Jason said, “how do you know the old device will work in the new conditions? The magic is getting pretty soupy down there, by all accounts.”

“We have been monitoring the magical conditions far more accurately than your primitive ritualists. The astral king has built a new device that will adapt to any variances in the magical conditions.”

“Oh, someone built a dangerous thing and took every variable into account. That’s definitely not the start of a thousand sci-fi disaster movies.”

“You have nothing to contribute but worthless doubt,” Kaal told him. “You have neither the knowledge nor the power to understand the device, let alone craft an

alternative. Your questions are pointless because you must accept the device we provide or none of this matters.”

Jason sighed.

“I’m getting very tired of making choices I don’t like because the alternative is a city blowing up or the planet getting sucked out through the side of the universe. Alright, we’ll use your device.”

“Of course you will; stop wasting my time. My being immortal does not mean I am willing to endure your vain attempts to confuse or frustrate me by indulging in irrelevancies from your world.”

Jason winced.

“Oof, you’ve got my number. Alright, I think we have the details of the job covered. That leaves the price.”

“Your city will not die. That is the price.”

“It’s not my city, and we’ve already talked about what happens if I walk away. There will be a price because a few weeks ago your people came in here and trashed the place, and you don’t get to pretend that’s acceptable. I wouldn’t be too worried; the locals won’t trust much of anything you give them. I looked at their list and it’s pretty much just a huge pile of spirit coins and the magic you used to knock up those fortress strongholds so quickly. The rituals shouldn’t be that complex. They’re confident they can scrub through them for any nasty surprises you slip in there, and they’ve got a city to rebuild.”

“Those sound like acceptable terms. But what do you want for your part, Jason Asano?”

“I want Mah Go Schaat’s study. I’ve been watching and I know you haven’t managed to break into it yet.”

“You have the keystone,” Kaal realised. “You managed to loot it from Mah Go Schaat’s body.”

Jason felt auras stir with greed from various points around the room. The people in the meeting well-informed enough to know the name of Mah Go Schaat also knew how valuable his possessions would be.

“I do have the key,” Jason said.

“And will you share the spoils with the people in that room with you?”

“It depends on what’s in it,” Jason said. “And how nice they are about asking.”

“Are you sure they’ll stop at asking?”

"They'll stop or be stopped," Jason said. "I hope for the best in people, but I've learned to prepare for the worst. But I'm going to pass you off to the city's representatives, now. Give them most of what they want or I'll back out of the whole thing."

Most of the room's occupants were over the shock of a god's presence and had been listening to Jason's negotiating style with a mix of trepidation, horror and disdain. Jason patted the Adventure Society director on the shoulder.

"Good luck, cobber. Tell me how it goes."

Jes Fin Kaal and the occupants of the room then watched Jason saunter off.

Jason walked into the workroom in his soul space where Clive had a workroom set up. White walls were covered in Clive's notes, the walls taking marks from Clive's finger like a whiteboard. The tables were covered in notes and measuring devices secured from the Magic Society, showing every measurement they had managed to get from the magical emanations rising from deep below ground.

"Hiding from the people wanting to talk about Dominion paying you a visit?"

"Yep. How's the research going?"

"I have very little idea how to even prepare to examine this device the messengers will give us. There just isn't enough information to work with."

Jason looked around at the walls covered floor to ceiling in Clive's scrawled notes, along with tables piled high with folders, notebooks and crystals with aura recordings.

"Okay," he said.

"Obviously, we can't trust the device the messengers give us," Clive said.

"Agreed."

"But I have no confidence at all in deciphering what it does in any remotely practical timeframe."

"That makes sense," Jason acknowledged. "The data you have on the natural array is secondhand at best, and the messenger device will use magic more advanced than what this world has."

"It may even be uniquely bound to messenger magic," Clive said. "Our best bet is to bring the device into your soul space. You can copy it perfectly here, allowing us to disassemble and examine it safely."

"Not a chance," Jason said.

"Why not?" Clive asked.

"Because I think you're wrong about being able to do so safely. If I were a devious astral king-"

"Which you are."

"Hurtful, but to continue: I would look at someone like me, and a device like the one we're dealing with, and see an opportunity. Traditional soul implants, like star seeds, aren't going to work on me. But I'm just a half-cooked astral king and Vesta Carmis Zell is the real thing. She's also known for soul engineering."

"Soul engineering," Clive said with a shudder. "Necromancy but worse. It's almost unheard of in Pallimustus. The only example I've seen was that sword with a disembodied soul as a container, and that was in an astral space. It wasn't in Pallimustus proper."

"Well, this astral king is something of an expert, according to the messenger commander I've got locked up in here. She may well be capable of building something that can harm me if, of my own volition, I bring it past the defences of my soul."

"Such as a mysterious device you want to examine, thinking nothing can hurt you," Clive realised.

"Exactly."

"Then we're stuck trusting this device?"

"No," Jason said. "We may be able to go halfway. You know what most astral kings can't do?"

"I'm going to go with 'be humble,'" Clive said, getting a laugh from Jason.

"That's definitely true, but I'm talking about my spirit domains. The realm inside my soul is something every astral king has a version of. My spirit domains are something else, though. I don't have the same power there, because they're a claimed patch of regular reality instead of a homebrew universe. It might be enough to dig out whatever nasty secrets this device holds without letting it inside my soul. I'll have to take my cloud house off cafeteria duty long enough to turn it into a proper spirit domain, but we need to get a good look at this device without exposing my soul to it."

"Will that be effective?" Clive asked. "I genuinely have no idea how any of your strange soul powers work. This might be a good chance to discuss that, actually."

He started looking around the messy room.

"Let me grab a notebook and I'll start going through some... Jason? Oh, you disappeared, that's very mature. Come back here. I'm inside your soul, Jason, I know you can hear me!"