

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!"