

Chapter 716

Actual Adventurers

Jason and Allayeth watched the cloud palace break down into thick fog that obscured the area and replaced the smell of ash and wet mud with a fresh, clean scent. It was slowly drawn into the cloud flask like a massive genie returning to its bottle.

"I'm surprised the city was willing to use the construction magic provided by the messengers so quickly," Jason said.

"I believe that using it to replace your building is a large part of that," Allayeth told him. "The Adventure Society is, I believe, largely on your side. They understand what you've done and how hard you fought for the city during the Battle of Yaresh."

"Plenty of people fought as hard or harder."

"But not quite so loudly," Allayeth pointed out. "You made something of a spectacle of yourself, and more than once. But the way you did it, along with various other concerns, have left the non-adventuring portion of the city elite voicing various concerns."

"Other concerns?"

"You keep doing things the way the messengers do them. Your aura is like theirs and you've hardly been discreet in demonstrating this. During the battle, they challenged you in rather unusual fashion; what people are calling aura speech. You responded not just in kind but in such a way as it resonated over the battleground. Not to mention that you occasionally float around the same way they do, you still refuse to hand over the messenger prisoners, you won't—"

"Point made," Jason acknowledged. "Although I did most of that in direct opposition to the messengers. You said that the city elite were *voicing* concerns, not that they genuinely held them."

"I did say that, yes."

"So they're using me as an easy punching pug to rail against."

"Your rather bold way of conducting yourself has certain unconventional advantages, Jason, but there are very good reasons that most take a more decorous approach. When you mark yourself as an outsider, you make an easy target for exclusionary political tactics."

"I'm familiar with the approach. On my world, my political enemies painted me as a shady, untrustworthy figure as well."

"How did that work out for them?"

"I don't know. I stopped paying attention, saved the world and got out. I wasn't in the best place back then. I say back then, but it hasn't been that long since I left. I've been working a lot on letting go of my anger and vengefulness."

"And how is that going?"

"Calcifer Bynes came out of my portal on his feet. A year ago he would have come out in a bucket."

"That would have had ramifications."

"And that's always been my problem; people keep warning me of ramifications, without considering the ramifications of crossing me. So, I started to show them. I didn't like where that took me. There's a saying on my world about people who fight with monsters and the dangers of becoming monsters themselves. I went further down that path than I like and it's taken me the better part of a year to walk it back."

"And have you?"

"Not all the way and I never will. The danger of that path is that you have to go that way, at least a little, if you're going to fight monsters. The temptation is to keep going. To be the power. It's so easy to justify every step until you find yourself somewhere you can't justify being. At that point, you have to either go back or change who you are, and that's where you lose yourself."

"He still has some way to go," Arabelle said, emerging from the fog. "He still struggles to stand still for more than a minute without explaining how dark and edgy he is to the middle distance."

Jason gave her a thin smile.

"Because I keep finding myself in circumstances that make me confront these issues all over again."

"And you always will," Arabelle told him. "Which leaves you the choice of whining about it for the rest of your life or learning to accept it without a near-constant stream of brooding monologues."

"I'm working on it."

"I know."

"Was there something you wanted, Arabelle?"

"Emir asked me again if you would be willing to speak with his associate."

"I've sensed her probing the cloud house. She hasn't been very polite about it."

"She's a diamond-ranker, Jason. She doesn't have to be."

Jason's expression turned hard and he glanced briefly at Allayeth, then shook his head.

"I am so very tired of being weaker than everything I have to deal with," he muttered.
"Shade, grab the flask when it's done."

"Jason..." Arabelle said. He ignored her and opened a portal arch to his soul realm. He went through and Arabelle made to follow but was repelled by the curtain of energy. The energy vanished and the arch vanished into the ground. Arabelle sighed.

"He normally responds well to some light teasing," she said.

"That was my assessment as well," Allayeth said. "Has something changed?"

"There is little I can share, as Jason is under my care. And even if he were not, my first loyalty is to him, not to you."

Allayeth ran an assessing gaze over Arabelle.

"I have found that the people around Jason lack much of the fearful reverence most have for diamond-rankers. Is that his influence?"

"That, and when you spend enough time around Jason, you meet more than just diamond-rankers."

"Like Dominion randomly appearing in a meeting?"

"Yes."

"Why did a god choose to make that display? I don't believe for a moment that it was a simple whim."

"I have my guesses, but I would not presume to understand the reasoning of a god. Like people, how they portray themselves is no sure indicator of their true nature or intentions. Look at the god Deception taking the role of Purity without anyone knowing. For centuries he warped the church towards the more exclusionary and intolerant aspects of purity as a concept."

"It still unsettles me that the other gods never informed us."

"The gods have their rules, just as we do."

"That fact also unsettles me, along with leaving me conflicted. I'm not sure if I like the idea of the beings that guide the world having rules I don't understand. It makes me wonder about their motives, which is an uncomfortable position to find myself in. I also wonder why the rules are there, and how they are enforced. To what degree can they act beyond their remit?"

"You should talk to Jason about it."

"He has answers?"

"No, but he enjoys the questions. As you saw, he treats the gods the way he treats everyone else."

"Why do they tolerate it?"

“You wondered why Dominion would appear before us all and allow Jason to talk to him like that. Perhaps showing us that he would was the point.”

“I thought you wouldn’t presume to understand the reasoning of a god?”

“That’s why I said ‘perhaps.’ It was a guess.”

“What does showing that he would tolerate Jason like that accomplish?”

“Do you look down on Jason, Lady Allayeth?”

“No.”

“No? There isn’t some part of you that looks at him and files him away under ‘just a silver-ranker’ in your mind?”

“Not *just* a silver-ranker, no. But he is a silver-ranker.”

Arabelle looked at the spot where Jason’s portal vanished.

“I wouldn’t presume to tell a diamond-ranker what to do,” Arabelle lied, “but I would advise against letting Lord Charist make any more oppressive moves towards Jason.”

“I am not his keeper.”

“Aren’t you? I will take my leave, Lady Allayeth.”

The fog had much diminished over the course of their conversation, but a goodly amount was yet to return to the flask. Arabelle walked into it, vanishing from Allayeth’s senses.

The Adventure Society director, Musin Heath, was seated behind the desk in his office, staring at Vidal Ladiv.

“I’m sorry, they did what?” Musin asked.

“They took a contract, Director,” Vidal repeated.

Musin ran his hands through his hair and let out a groan.

“Why would they do that?”

“They are adventurers, Director, and there is no shortage of contracts, as you know. After the attack on the city, there are too few adventurers and too many tasks.”

“I’m well aware of that, Ladiv. I was the one who implemented the campaign to get the inactive adventurers who stepped up to defend the city to stay active. My point is that Asano is the focus of some very important events right now.”

“I would point out, Director, that what you described seems to be Jason Asano’s normal circumstance. If he didn’t take contracts while embroiled in major events, I’m not sure he ever would.”

“I would be okay with that.”

Musin let out a weary sigh.

“What contract did they take?”

“I’m sorry, Director, but I have misspoken. It’s *contracts*, plural.”

“Multiple contracts?”

“There’s an open sweep-and-clear for the northern regions. They’ve registered for that.”

Musin nodded. “The northern regions have been underserved since we started focusing on the infested towns to the south. What else?”

“They’ve claimed a lot of the high-difficulty, low-reward contracts that most adventurers avoid. I spoke to the jobs hall officials and they said they were about to increase the listed reward on most of them. They even offered and Asano’s team declined.”

“I see,” Musin said, then leaned back in his chair. “They’re looking to rank up.”

“That will take years. They’ll be lucky to reach gold by the next monster surge.”

“And if they don’t get started, it’ll take until the monster surge after that. Can you imagine what it’s like being silver-rankers under so much gold and even diamond-rank scrutiny?”

“Yes, Director,” Vidal said flatly and Musin snorted a laugh.

“We’ve made you the message boy in a hailstorm, haven’t we, Ladviv?”

“Asano’s team also collected other contracts, Director. Based on the locations they were choices to fill in the gaps of their intended route. It seems they will be heading out of the city and moving north-east. They’ll make a large, zig-zagging loop and then return to the city from the north-west.”

“How many contracts did they take?”

“Seventy-four.”

“Seventy-four? How long is that going to take them?”

“They’ve reported three as complete so far, Director.”

“They’re delivering reports to the jobs hall through Asano’s shadow familiar?”

“Yes, Director. They have estimated between four and nine days, but any number of factors make it hard to predict.”

“And they’ve done three already. When did they take the contracts?”

Vidal pulled out his pocket watch.

“Approximately six-and-a-half hours ago, Director.”

“They’re keen, I’ll give them that. At least if they’re going to go off and do something, it’s being actual adventurers. If that was the worst behaviour I had to deal with, I’d be the happiest Adventure Society director in the world.”

Musin leaned his elbow on his desk and his forehead in his hand.

"Asano has obligations," he said. "The force to head underground is being formed, with his team as part of it. He also needs to be present for the handing over of the thing he asked for from the messengers."

"I asked him about that before he left, Director. On the latter, he said that he will teleport in as appropriate. As for the force, sir, he made it clear that while he does not need to lead it, he will not be subordinate to it."

"Did you tell him that's not how Adventure Society expeditions work?"

"I did, Director. He said that once the Adventure Society has publicly redressed Lord Charist for invading his home, he would be happy to discuss adherence to society protocols and institutional integrity."

The director closed his eyes and rubbed his temples.

"I'm getting a headache. Should that even be possible?"

"It seems to be going around, Director."

"And by going around, do you mean around Asano?"

"I do, although diamond-rankers tend to elicit similar symptoms. With the extended monster surge, they have been acting far more publicly than normal."

"I knew it," Musin said. "I knew as soon as I got the reports from the Rimaros branch that Asano would be a diamond-rank problem. I have no idea what they were thinking with this false identity business; he was obviously going to become very overt, very quickly."

"This is why you voiced your public support for Asano?"

"You're new to Yaresh, Mr Ladiv. One of the features of our — usually — fine city is that it has two diamond-rankers that are here with reasonable frequency, reasonably openly. One of the results of this is that anyone in my position is required to do their best to manage said diamond-rankers, which is roughly as easy as wrestling a tornado that just passed through a cooking oil warehouse."

"I don't think that's possible, Director."

"No, it is not. And Asano has that feel. The more I read the reports about what he's done, how he's done it and who he's done it with, the more I got that feeling. With a diamond-ranker, Mr Ladiv, all you can do is get on board or get out of the way. Maybe, just maybe, you can nudge them slightly in a direction that won't leave you spending the next month cleaning up after them. Once it was clear that Lord Charist had failed to pressure Asano and Lady Allayeth would be taking charge, I decided to get on board with Asano."

"You may pay for that politically, Director."

"That may be so, Mr Ladiv, but it's still the right choice."

"May I ask why?"

"Because the point of my job isn't accruing political power. The Adventure Society exists to protect the populace. Sometimes that means putting up with people who are a pain to deal with. For all of Lord Charist's headstrong bluster, Lady Allayeth's schemes and Jason Asano's brazen absurdity, each one of them acts in the cause of what they think is right."

"And we just have to hope that what they believe to be right is the same as what we do?"

"We can nudge, where we're able. I've found Lady Allayeth quite reasonable in that regard. She mostly ignores me, yes, but at least she listens first. Lord Charist and Asano don't seem as amenable, but I believe they hew close enough to my own sensibilities."

"Then you will not attempt to curtail Asano and his team's contract activities?"

"Have you read Asano's file?"

"It's restricted, Director. I don't have the authority."

"Well, suffice it to say that time and again, Jason Asano and his team have demonstrated not only that they'll do the right thing but that they'll spot it before most everyone else. Did you know that while Asano was still believed dead, his team discovered that the messengers were preparing to invade? That man Standish is some kind of magical genius. The Magic Society screwed him over and now they're desperate to get him back in the fold."

"And you want to avoid that mistake with Asano?"

"You're damn right I do. He already threatened to give up his Adventure Society membership. I think that was more to make a point than his actual intention, but there's no way I'm going to test that man's resolve."

"Because of what you've read in his file?"

"For a start. The messengers, who won't deal with anyone, will deal with him and think he's some kind of king. The god of Dominion — the god of deciding who gets to be king — showed up for a chat, and not for the first time. If anyone is fool enough to treat Asano like a silver-ranker, they'll pay for it."

"Like Calcifer Bynes."

"Exactly."

"Are you concerned about his father?"

"Not yet. Asano clearly has a role to play, and Gormanston Bynes is nothing if not efficient in squeezing the value out of his enemies before putting them down."

"And after?"

“Bynes is part of the Aristocratic Faction. More than anyone else, they respect powerful backing. I’m hoping he looks at the beings standing behind Asano and backs off.”

“Is that likely?”

“I don’t know. Asano rolled his son, but he hates weakness, especially from his own people. He’s also smart, and going after Asano is not. If anything, I think Gormanston will try to use or ally with him. Asano may have the etiquette of an explosive device, but he is not weak.”