

## 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.

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“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.”