

## 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.”

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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.”

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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.