

Chapter 745

What is the Adventure Society

Rufus emerged from a shadow portal in Jason's cloud palace, in front of the open metal sphere. A moment later, Jason emerged from the opening and walked down the ramp.

"The Continental Council rep finally turned up?" Jason asked.

"Yes," Rufus said, then nodded at the orb. "Didn't that thing used to be a different colour?"

The previously brassy colour had shifted over the last couple of days to a glossy dark grey.

"Yeah," Jason said. "Clive is obsessed with figuring out why, but he's also obsessed with everything else in there."

"Find anything amazing?"

"It depends on who you ask," Jason told him. "If the diamond-rank messenger had any amazing magical relics, tools, weapons or anything, he had them stashed somewhere else. Everything in there is about research."

"Clive is extra excited, then."

"Clive is fizzing like an alchemy experiment on the verge of going very, very wrong."

"But you didn't want this thing for Clive, did you?"

"No. I've been letting events push back the larger mission for too long. My hope was that this study would hold the astral magic secrets I need to finish building the bridge between worlds. Since I accidentally destroyed the artefact that Dawn gave me to do that, I have to do it the hard way now. The longer I leave it, the more Earth's dimensional membrane will break down."

"Have you ever considered what happens to your planet if you die? You've thrown yourself into some pretty dire situations, Jason."

"The World Phoenix won't put all her eggs in my basket. There's a plan B. And C and D. Dawn wouldn't tell me what these plans are, but she strongly implied it's best if I do it. The World Phoenix will see the world saved, one way or another, but all it cares about is the dimension integrity of that portion of the universe. The living things on the planet that happens to be there don't factor into its thinking."

"Did you ever consider playing it safe? Hiding away until the job was done?"

"No. If I had the choice again today? I probably would. But after I got back from Earth, I was so angry. I felt like a ball of magma with my personality plastered over it in a shell,

slowly burning out from the inside. I'm still realising just how compromised my judgement became while I was on Earth."

"I remember," Rufus said. "After you came back you seemed much the same at first. Then the cracks started showing until Farrah and I were worried you were going to break altogether. She ran off to yell at a diamond-ranker she was so worried about you. A diamond-ranker. She's always charted her own path, but she never would have done that before we met you. You're a bad influence, you know that?"

"You're welcome."

Rufus chuckled, shaking his head. Then he looked over at the orb again.

"Does it have the astral magic you need?" he asked. "Or is it too early to tell?"

"Too early, but I'm extremely optimistic. Learning the material that's in there is going to be an absolute prick, though, even with my advantages. I've had the good fortune that most of my astral magic studies have been with materials and teachers from outside of this world. The astral magic here is a little backwards, as if someone's been deliberately slowing its development for centuries."

"You think there's some grand conspiracy?"

"I do. We know that the Cult of the Builder has been here a lot longer than the last few decades. That's just when they started their recruiting drive and allying with the Purity church to prime for the Builder's invasion. I think their original purpose was to make sure this planet doesn't become too dimensionally active. Our universes are fragile, especially mine. The Builder inherited the responsibility of ensuring that they don't collapse from the previous Builder, who caused the problem in the first place. From what I can tell, the World Phoenix has been riding him about it for at least a few billion years."

"But the Builder didn't fix it. He used that fragility to set Pallimustus up for invasion, right?"

"Yep. The Builder has been band-aiding the dimensional integrity of our worlds just enough to exploit them for his own ends. That's why he left that magic door on Earth and I think his cult has been here on Pallimustus, maybe forever. Making sure astral magic doesn't advance to the point of causing trouble. The occasional diamond-ranker shooting off into the cosmos is one thing, but I think the real problem is Clive."

"Clive?"

"Clive, and all the people like him that came before. Geniuses that advanced astral magic beyond the invisible limitations put on it. If the Builder cult hadn't been busy with their invasion, I think it would have only been a matter of time before they found Clive and assassinated him."

“That suggests Clive might be more right about Magic Society corruption than even he thinks.”

“Yeah. And now Clive has his hands on what I suspect is the most advanced trove of magical knowledge on the planet. Seriously, even a glance at this stuff showed off how dense the material is. Our diamond-rank benefactor didn’t stock a lot of foundational material; he was all about the advanced stuff. I am maybe — maybe — ready to *start* studying what’s in there, and that’s with Dawn tutoring me for years and an innate sense for dimensional forces.”

“A sense for dimensional forces?”

“Yeah. I spent months in the liminal space the Builder’s door gave me access to, tweaking the fundamental building blocks of reality as I fumblingly repaired the link between our worlds. Then I was inside a space where I ended up reworking a pocket of reality. I did that twice. By the end of all that, I could feel the astral. You’ve seen my cloak, the way it blows around as if there’s a different wind to the normal one?”

“Sure.”

“I feel those winds. The flow of the astral. Impossibly far away, yet close enough to touch.”

He stretched his hand out in front of him.

“I really can, you know. Reach out and touch it.”

His hand dropped to his side and his voice returned to normal as he snorted a laugh.

“It’s a very bad idea,” he added.

“I remember that too,” Rufus said. “You almost killed yourself boosting your portal so everyone could escape the underwater complex.”

Jason nodded.

“Anyway,” he said. “The point is that I have a lot going for me when it comes to studying astral magic. If nothing else, I’ve got Clive to research with, and for all my advantages, I’ll never grok the theory like he does. But the materials in that orb are dense. Books and recording crystals where the knowledge starts somewhere around the point my current understanding ends. I am extremely confident that what I need is in there, but it’s going to take years of study before I’m ready to use any of it.”

“What about all those avatars helping you study?”

“That’s already taking them into account. There are centuries of accumulated research in that orb. From a being with access to some of the most advanced magical knowledge in the cosmos. Then assuming I can get my head around all of that, I need to figure out how to design the rest of a half-complete dimensional bridge created by an

artefact designed by the World Phoenix, who had to crib notes from the Builder to do it in the first place.”

“So, not quick, then.”

“Dawn estimated ten years. Any guess I made at this point would be so ill-informed as to be pointless, but I can’t see ten years as anything but an optimistic minimum.”

“I thought it was ten years until something vague and menacing happened.”

“Yeah, but it got pretty obvious that completing this bridge is going to trigger something I don’t like. I think she’s been so vague because she knows I’d do something drastic if I found out. Doesn’t want me screwing up her boss’ plan.”

“That sounds like exactly what you would do. I’m just wondering why you didn’t push.”

“Dawn has done a lot for me. I know that she’s always working toward the World-Phoenix’s agenda, but Dawn has gone well above and beyond any duty she had. I know that she wouldn’t put this on me if she didn’t think it was for the best.”

“That shows a lot of trust.”

“She’s earned it. And even her boss has done me right a few times. Even if its motivations weren’t to benefit my wellbeing, they did, and that’s worth something.”

“I respect that. Clive’s in there now, getting a start on research?”

“We aren’t at that stage yet; it’s going to be a while. He’s taking stock of what’s in there, seeing if there are any unpleasant surprises. I don’t want to take any of this into my soul realm until we’re as sure as we can be that it isn’t all a complex play from the messengers to spike my soul. We’re pretty sure it’s fine, but I’m not going to bet my soul on pretty sure.”

“You should pull Clive off of that for the moment. The Continental Council rep is in Yareh and he wants to see the whole team.”

“What’s he like?”

“Angry.”

“At us?”

“In general, from what I can tell. He already put an axe in someone’s head. The woman was a gold-ranker, so she’s fine, but it certainly set a tone.”

“And here we were trying to be all diplomatic.”

Gormanston Bynes looked around the Yareh elite gathered in the largest of the Adventure Society campus halls. Most were silver, but every faction represented had at least one gold, including Gormanston himself. Although he was no stranger to the game of politics, he had only disdain for all but a handful of the room’s occupants. His own people

were not spared from this, but if he didn't wade into the mud, he would never pull his family free of it.

For far too long, House Bynes had allowed themselves to slide. Too much indulgence in the power left to them by the generations before. Too little maintenance of the foundations on which that power rested. Gormanston had tried to lead by example, but no one was looking for an example. They just saw him as another source of shade to laze in.

That was why he had started involving himself in the family's affairs. The aristocratic faction was just like his family: weak, foolish and oblivious to their own path to self-destruction. Claiming power within their impatient, short-sight and self-serving ranks had taken little more than turning up and not running his mouth. Decades later, he had accomplished little more than bailing water from a ship whose sinking was inevitable. He had reached the conclusion that the ship needed to be drydocked and burned down to ashes. Only then could a new one could be built in its place.

The invasion of Yaresh and the events around it was not the fire that Gormanston wanted, but it was the one he had. Despite everything that had gone on, people were still bickering over reputation and advantage while the populace lived in tents, in the ruins of what once were their homes. That had been the last straw. To lead was a duty, and the elite of Yaresh had forgotten that entirely.

Today was the day the pieces started falling into place. The day that people started falling out of place. He would have liked to involve the boy, Asano, and his knack for being at the centre of events. He was a fine adventurer but too unpredictable. It was better to work around him than with him, letting the waves he kicked up become ripples before trying to navigate them.

This meeting was a perfect example. Most of the people in it believed that the Adventure Society's Continental Council representative had come to bring Asano in line. The ones who had no trace of core in their aura knew better. Every person in the room was a member of the Adventure Society, yet only a handful were truly adventurers. Outside of a monster surge, when they had to keep their benefits, none of them would set foot in a jobs hall.

The large double doors to the room slammed open to admit a massive man. Gormanston was large, one of the elves who had an unusually powerful physique. This man was his leonid counterpart, an angry, ambulatory hillock covered in snow-white fur. He wore hard leathers that looked adequately tough to wear on an adventuring contract. If Jason had been present he would have thought the leonid looked more like a bikie.

Behind him, almost invisible behind the gold ranker whose aura was as imposing as his visage, was Vidal Ladiv. If he was unhappy at being recruited into yet another high-rank mess he did a superb job of hiding it from his expression and his aura.

“Is this everyone?” the man bellowed with the spine-tingling rumble that only leonids could manage. “Alright, gather up; this isn’t a bloody ball you pointless gronks.”

Gormanston sent out a silent wish that was granted immediately as a silver-ranker stepped forward.

“You can’t talk to us like that! Do you know who—”

He was cut off by the leonid grabbing his face, having closed the distance so fast that it would look like teleportation to anyone below gold rank. The leonid held his arm out straight and was so tall that it left the silver-ranker dangling by his head, arms scrabbling ineffectually at the leonid’s arm in a panic. The Leonid looked at the man as if he were holding up an article of soiled clothing and recited a quick spell incantation.

“Unquenchable flame.”

The man’s head burst into flames that licked harmlessly at the leonid’s hand, rising between his fingers. The screams of the silver-ranker were muffled by his covered mouth. The leonid marched back to the still-open doors, the burning man dangling from his grip, legs flailing. The leonid casually tossed him out and then closed the doors, cutting off the now-unmuffled shrieking. The moment the doors sealed, the room was plunged into heavy silence. The leonid turned, his grin that of a lion on spotting a limping antelope.

“I put an axe through someone’s head and you idiots still haven’t learned to read a room. Any silver-rankers who are looking to talk back to a gold had best make sure you kill some of us first, or you may find us disinclined to listen.”

He started striding back towards the group, many of whom involuntarily flinched. He stopped halfway across the room, occupying half of it with no one but himself and Vidal, quietly standing by the wall. Everyone else occupied the other half.

“My name is Marcus Hargrave Xenoria,” he announced. “I am an adventurer and the man the Adventure Society saw fit to deploy to your city after hearing about the events that have taken place here. I have read the complaints lodged by the adventurers, both against the local Adventure Society administrative staff and against...”

He reached into his leather vest to pull out a folded, slightly crumpled sheet of paper.

“...sweet gods, are they really called Team Biscuit? Did they let one of their familiars pick the name?”

“Actually, yes, they did,” Vidal said from over by the back wall. It was the first time many in the room realised he was there.

Marcus shook his head.

“Bloody young people”

He stuffed the paper roughly into his pants pocket and turned his attention back to the group.

“The point is, the people leading this city seem to have forgotten what the Adventure Society is. I’m told that everyone in this room is a member, which makes you both the city elite and part of the Adventure Society. That makes it a failure on your part.”

He marched up to the group, looking down at one of the silver-rankers at the front.

“You. You’re in the Adventure Society?”

The man nodded.

“I’ll ignore the very obvious question of how for the moment and ask you this instead: what is the Adventure Society?”

The silver-ranker hesitated only a moment before answering.

“A collection of people who—”

The force of Marcus’ hand hitting the side of the silver-ranker’s head tousled the hair of some of the nearby people. Others were bowled out of the way as the man went flying. Marcus turned to the next one.

“You. What is the Adventure Society?”

The man didn’t answer immediately, his eyes darting as he looked for a response that wouldn’t lead to violence.

“A shield,” he said finally. He looked up at the looming leonid, who narrowed his eyes.

“Go on,” Marcus prompted.

“They protect—”

“They?” Marcus interrupted. “I thought you were one of us.”

“I’m sorry, I—”

“Shut up!” Marcus roared, the silver-ranker stumbling back into the person behind him. The leonid turned and paced back, shaking his head.

“Exactly what I expected,” he said. “Ladiv, bring over the list.”

Vidal walked over to Marcus while opening the flap on a satchel hanging from a strap over his shoulder. He took out a folder and handed it to Marcus, who removed the single piece of paper before tossing the folder away. Vidal’s shoulders slumped only briefly before he moved to pick it up.

“What I have in my hand,” Marcus announced, “is a very short list of names. I was firmly instructed to give you all a chance to prove yourselves before I finalised it, which is what I have just done. I would say I was disappointed, but that would have required me to

have so much as a single expectation of you. I am now going to read this list, and if your name is on it, you still get to be a member of the Adventure Society when you leave this room. If anyone has a complaint about their absence from this list..."

Marcus' grin showed off how many very large teeth a leonid had.

"...I will be downright ecstatic to address your concerns personally. Any questions?"

The silence that followed was broken only by the quiet rustle of Vidal returning the folder to his satchel.