

Chapter 764

Taking the Position of a God

The expedition was waiting on the return of Amos Pensinata and the other gold-rankers that had taken off down the shaft. Jason and his companions sat around a pair of tables playing board games while they waited, discussing advancement to gold-rank. Glow stones floated above each table to light them up while a large privacy screen kept their conversation private. It also saved the rest of the expedition from Neil's loud complaining when games went badly.

"You're saying that it's basically what we thought," Neil said. "It's about how we relate to our essences. Is it my go? I'm playing the barracks."

Belinda groaned as he put down his card.

"Why do you always go with a military strat?" she complained. "You're the healer."

"Not in this game," Neil told her. "I'm allowed to play how I like."

"Yeah, Gold-rank is about the essences," Jason confirmed as he put down a card.

"I'm playing the west trading post."

"I think what we're looking for are specifics," Clive said. "That's what Allayeth shared with you, right? I'm playing an apothecary."

"Yeah," Jason said. "What it comes down to is the way that essences affect us."

"That's not a thing," Rufus said from the other table. "Don't tell me you've come around to that nonsense Anisa was hawking about essences tainting our pure souls."

"She wasn't right," Jason said, "but she wasn't entirely wrong, either, from what I'm told, and it gels with my own experiences. Essences don't impose themselves on our personalities when we absorb them. What they do is find aspects of our personalities that are already there, and that they resonate with. They then heighten those aspects over time, drawing out those parts of us and making them more central to our identities."

"I don't know if I buy that," Rufus said.

"I do," Humphrey said. "Essence users, especially adventurers, are all strong personalities. You could even say that the stronger the personality, the stronger the adventurer. I think what Jason is saying is that it's not so much changing who we are as concentrating the elements that make us who we are. Haven't you ever noticed how much people just seem to fit with their powers? Lindy's powers are twisty and versatile, Clive's are complicated and rely on magical knowledge. Neil's powers are understated, but with the chance to really make a show of things from time to time. His protection magic is oddly hostile but always there when we need it. Jason's powers are all at once elusive, flashy,

domineering and terrible, yet also merciful and benevolent. But always on his terms, and when he decides to put an end to something, it ends.”

“That doesn’t sound flattering,” Jason said. “But I think you’re right. I’ve been considering this a lot since Allayeth told me about this stuff, so let’s take me as an example of how an essence affects a person. When I first came to this world, I ended up in a knife fight with the first person I met. I accidentally killed him and I completely lost it. I wasn’t a violent person. The only fights I’d been in were children’s scuffles. So, when I killed the guy, I had a meltdown.”

“You’re talking about Landemere Vane,” Clive said.

“Yep,” Jason said. “If I was going to kill anyone he was a great pick, but that didn’t matter. I just lost it afterwards. Anyway, I ended up killing more people that day. All cannibal cultists, but I didn’t have a lot of time to think about it. It was all in a rush of action and I was concussed from multiple blows to the head. Plus, I was pretty sick from spirit coin over-use.”

“You’re lucky you were normal rank,” Sophie said from Rufus’ table. “I used a coin when we fought the Builder and his cult in the astral space. I was only bronze rank and I had to be carried up that tower. I’m going to move my guy here.”

She moved her teal Sobek miniature.

“You can’t end on a water space,” Humphrey told her.

“Yes I can, because it’s the big crocodile man. I can end on a water space and I count as being in all the zones he touches.”

“That doesn’t sound fair,” Humphrey complained.

“No, she’s right Humphrey,” Jason said. “Now, by the time everything calmed down that first day, I’d seen so much crazy stuff. Crossing realities, finding out magic was real, surviving an evil cult. Getting brain damage, getting healed from brain damage, seeing a kitchen full of chopped-up body parts. And I’d killed people. Again. A good handful of people. I was building up to another proper breakdown. But first thing the next morning, I absorbed the rest of my essence set.”

“You’re saying you became okay with killing because you got a bunch of evil powers?” Gary asked.

“Not exactly,” Jason said, “But kind of, I suppose. Since Allayeth told me about this stuff, I’ve been trying to explore it as I meditate. She said I won’t be able to sense those connections properly until I’m closer to the peak of silver-rank, but I think I’ve caught the edge of them.”

“Jason,” Humphrey said. “How are things going with the gold rankers?”

“Oh, come on,” Sophie complained. “You just want them to come back because you’re losing and you don’t want to merge with Rufus.”

“I hate the merge mechanic,” Rufus complained. “We should have just played *Blood Rage*.”

“I’m still halfway through repainting the minis,” Jason said.

“I thought Shade already painted them,” Rufus said.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “He painted them black, and now I have to paint them with actual colours.”

“I still assert they looked excellent,” Shade’s voice came from Jason’s shadow.

Jason extended his senses, punching through the interference of the element-laden ambient magic to observe the gold-rankers.

“They caught up with those three guys and they’re fighting now. Ooh, Rufus, your mum has some nasty abilities. And people say I’m the one with the evil powers.”

“My mother does not have evil powers,” Rufus insisted.

“Jason, we were talking about your evil powers,” Clive pointed out.

“Right,” Jason said. “So, I was shaken by killing people, and pretty moralistic about it, too.”

“He wanted us to not kill a bunch of Red Table cultists just because they were prisoners,” Gary said, shaking his head. “What else were we going to do? Spend a week hauling them across the desert, giving them who knows how many chances to escape, just so they could be executed in a city?”

“The point is,” Jason said, “my attitude changed. Swiftly and drastically, without me even noticing. It was only a few months later that the barge full of sand pirates came along, you remember? That was my first big expedition, and I killed a lot of people. I don’t even know how many. It was only afterwards that it even occurred to me to question it. I just went there and killed people because I was told to.”

“I remember that,” Farrah said. “We talked about it because you were worried you were turning into a bloodthirsty monster without realising it.”

“Bloodthirsty,” Jason echoed. “That’s the operative word. I’m convinced that it was my blood essence finding the parts of me that are capable of violence — we all have them, after all — and bringing them to the fore. Something else that Allayeth told me is that the essences don’t just amplify aspects of our personalities at random. It brings out the things we need. And what I needed, for better or worse, was a propensity for violence that my life to that point had never required. Suppressed, even. I was lucky enough to grow up in a culture where violence was neither needed nor wanted.”

“That’s definitely not the case here,” Neil said. “Still, you could have been a healer or something, right?”

“Sure,” Jason said. “I could have held out for different essences. But I took the ones I had, and they responded to that choice. I think it’s fairly obvious that my dark essence drew out my tendencies to deceive, obfuscate and confuse. My sin essence brought out the authoritarian tendencies that got Dominion’s attention.”

“How does that work?” Taika asked. “Shouldn’t sin bring out all the nasty parts of you? Making you all lazy and horny and murderous?”

“I’d say tyranny is pretty nasty,” Jason said. “Remember that the essence draws on my nature, meaning my understanding of sin. And sin isn’t about some objective right and wrong; it’s about transgression against a certain position on what’s right and what’s wrong. Good and evil. You can check any religious text for examples but, in this case, the position in question is mine.”

“Religious texts,” Neil said. “Because those positions you’re talking about are normally held by gods. Jason’s sin essence put his mind in a place where he’s taking the position of a god, arbitrating what constitutes good and evil.”

“Exactly,” Jason agreed.

“Wait, what?” Neil asked. “You’re agreeing with me?”

“You’re not wrong,” Jason told him. “The powers we awaken are a reflection of what our essences represent to us. Clive has been telling me as much since the beginning. People who attack me or my allies within my area of influence — within my aura — are literally burdened with sin.”

“This does fill in a lot of gaps,” Clive said, nodding thoughtfully. “Certain things make a lot more sense when looked at with this in mind. Especially around the way people try and cultivate specific power sets. Certain choices I’ve wondered about suddenly make sense if there was a gold-ranker who knows all this guiding the process.”

“Why is any of this restricted information?” Belinda wondered. “Is it that bad for people to know all this?”

“If this is true, then I was taught something that was explicitly wrong, by people who unquestionably knew better,” Rufus said. “I don’t think my parents were trying to hamper me. Maybe the knowledge too early somehow impedes advancement in the early ranks.”

“I think it’s more likely that it affects personal development than power development,” Jason said. “Although, all this suggests that it’s the same thing in many ways. Think about your mother, Rufus. She understands how people work better than most. I think she made

sure you thought your essences didn't affect your personality so you didn't get caught up thinking about it."

"You think that would be a problem?" Rufus asked.

"Absolutely," Jason said. "Look at me. One of the first things I asked the goddess of Knowledge was if magic changed the way I think. She said that my mind was my own, which I suppose is technically true if the essences use what's already there. She told me to remember that everyone changes, all the time, whether they're magical or not. I've been thinking about the changes I've gone through since becoming magical almost constantly. "

"He has," Farrah agreed. "Really, really a lot."

"And there's the problem," Jason said. "I've been obsessing over my behaviour, my choices and the changes I'm going through. And now my mind is extremely messed up. I think they keep this stuff secret because it's healthier to go through this process without constantly second-guessing everything you do."

"But now we're silver-rank," Clive said. "The changes our essences have wrought are largely settled. The high-rankers around us have been dropping hints about this stuff for a while because we're ready to start exploring it."

"That would explain some of the things my mother has been saying when I've spoken to her over water link," Humphrey said.

"Your mother has been hinting at weird stuff and you didn't wonder about it?" Neil asked him.

"She's always trying to nudge me in one direction or another," Humphrey said. "It's easier just to go with it."

"Not always," Sophie pointed out.

"Yes, not always," Humphrey said, his tone implying it was a much-repeated response. Jason narrowed his eyes, peering at them thoughtfully for a moment, then grinned.

"What?" Belinda asked him.

"I think Danielle is looking forward to grandkids," Jason said.

The gold-rankers returned to the expedition, landing on the largest stone platform. Expedition members swiftly gathered around them as Amos, Gabriel and Emir each dropped what was probably a person under all the blood. Arabelle conjured javelin-sized needles that pinned the prisoners to the floor, piercing all their limbs and their torsos several times each. She then conjured a transparent jar above each and red life force started trickling from the needles to fill the jars with red liquid.

“That will stop them from regenerating too fast,” she said.

“Bro,” Taika said to Rufus. “Your mum is kind of hardcore.”

Jason nudged Gary on the arm.

“You knew she could do this stuff right?” Jason asked.

“Yep,” Gary said.

“Then how am I the guy with the evil powers?”

“She’s prettier than you.”

“Thank you, Gareth,” Arabelle said. “That’s very sweet of you.”

“Gary,” Rufus said through gritted teeth. “That’s my mother.”

“Yeah,” Jason said, “but it doesn’t matter whose mother she is, or how prettily her dark chocolate hair tumbles down over her shoulders, that is a classic evil power right there.”

Rufus glared at Jason.

“Dark chocolate hair?” he growled. He was about to continue when Humphrey placed a commiserating hand on his shoulder.

“Don’t,” Humphrey said in a hollow, trembling voice. “Engaging only makes it worse. It doesn’t stop them, it doesn’t help. Nothing helps.”

Miriam and the rest of the expedition looked on, their levels of befuddlement relating directly to how well they knew Jason and his team.

“Operations Commander,” she said warily. “I recommend we move on to questioning the prisoners.”

“Right, yes,” Jason agreed, then panned a scolding look across his team. “You’re all being very silly during a serious time and you should all be ashamed.”

Neil opened his mouth to protest but was silenced by a gesture from Humphrey.

From the gold-rankers that had captured the prisoner, Emir’s wife and chief of staff, Constance, stepped forward. She held out a sphere that many recognised.

“That’s a messenger communication orb,” Miriam said. “Are these people working with the messengers or did they take it from one of the elemental messengers?”

“I’d ask,” Gabriel said, “but even after getting juiced like this, it’s not easy to get a gold-ranker to talk. We can all hold up to a lot of pain.”

“Not all pain is the same,” Amos Pensinata growled and everyone felt his aura surge.

Jason had learned a lot from Amos about how to effectively wield his aura, but not all the learning was one way. Jason had an aptitude for soul attacks from which Amos had learned a lot. With his even more powerful aura, the result was formidable. The reaction from the prisoners was not what anyone had expected, however.

The three bloody prisoners started screaming, but only for a moment. Amos' aura was thrown back dismissively, washing over the expedition in a twisted, chaotic form. Every silver-ranker other than Jason was staggered, some even falling over. The research team were the worst affected, but the wave swiftly passed. A new aura shrouded the prisoners, unmistakable in its divinity.

The auras of gods were both overwhelmingly powerful and extremely specific. Only the most neophyte iron-ranker, new to having aura senses, would fail to identify which god they were faced with. Even for a god they had never heard of, the nature of a deity was plain to see.

The god Destruction's voice rumbled like an avalanche.

"The souls of my priests are mine to toy with, not yours."

The force of the divine will pushed out like a wave. The silver-rankers scrambled away, abandoning the platform for others more distant. Even the gold-rankers backed off except for Amos, and even he looked strained. Only Jason was wholly unaffected, to his incredible surprise.

The gods impressing their will on Jason after he released many of their followers during the Reaper trials was one of his most formative experiences as a young adventurer. It had left him spiritually battered but ultimately became the first time that enduring spiritual tribulation led to his soul growing stronger. The gods had made him stronger the hard way, along with marking him with an echo of the divine.

Now that power washed around him like a river flowing around a rock. Jason probed with his aura, finding the divine will equally impervious to him as he was to it. Pushing back was less like a river moving around a rock than a droplet of water landing on a mountain, only to slide away unnoticed. But the feedback from his probe confirm one thing: he was not subject to the will of the gods any more than they were subject to his. His best guess was that his status as a nascent astral king had somehow excised him from their power, at least as they applied to mortals of the world they oversaw.

He had no doubt the gods could still affect him perfectly well within their sphere of influence. Knowledge would still know everything he knew, and if Destruction wished to destroy him, he could. But a general expression of divine power was not something by which Jason was influenced any longer.

Jason stepped up beside Amos but Destruction ignored him, as if he weren't there at all, facing off against Amos and his defiance of the god.

"What are your priests doing down here?" Amos growled.

“Whatever I will,” Destruction rumbled. “You and those pathetic winged creatures are squabbling like children, not realising that it is my palm on which you perform your petty dance. Do as you will, mortals, it matters not. My desires are inescapable.”

“For every one of your servants I find down here,” Amos threatened, “I will find one of your hidden temples when I’m done. I will raze them to the ground or bury them in whatever hole they’re concealed in.”

The god’s laugh was like thunder.

“You threaten the god of destruction with destruction? There is nothing you can do to me, mortal. Destroying my temples only fulfils their ultimate purpose. Annihilating my worshippers only aids them in providing their greatest service. There are always those hungry for power to replace them, more than I could ever need. Those who hunger for power, not to dominate but to destroy. To fight me is to lose before you begin.”

The god’s presence vanished and the priests exploded in a visceral mess. Jason used his aura to shield himself and Amos, creating a wedge of clear space behind them while the rest of the platform was painted red.

“Well,” Gabriel said, walking up as he pulled a vial of crystal wash from his potion belt to tip over his head. “That could have gone better.”