

## Chapter 704

### Everyone Has a Price

“Whatever you may be thinking, Mr Asano, the diamond-rankers aren’t spending their days plotting ways to snatch away your secrets.”

Vidal Ladiv was not enjoying his job. He had always imagined people with real power to be sober and serious, dedicated to carrying out the duties that came with the power and influence they possessed. Sadly, they turned out to have the same pride, biases and vested interests as everyone else.

“I definitely wasn’t thinking that,” Jason said unconvincingly.

“The diamond-rankers have largely concerned themselves with monitoring messenger activity in the wake of the attack on Yaresh,” Vidal continued. Part of his job as liaison between the Adventure Society and Jason was giving Jason regular reports on the broad activities of the Adventure Society. It wasn’t what Vidal had been directed to do, but Jason would freeze him out if he didn’t. If that happened, the Adventure Society would deem Vidal’s assignment a failure.

Falling short on one assignment would not torpedo Vidal’s career, but such an important job came with extra attention. If the Adventure Society was happy with his work, it would mean not just more important jobs but some flexibility in choosing them. Vidal was very much looking forward to a diplomatic or administrative job, far away from anyone as volatile as Jason Asano.

“The best assessments we have suggest that the messengers lost more people in the attack than intended,” Vidal continued his report. “Once their numbers were sent into a frenzy, they were less effective at using their summoned monsters as a shield. Then, once our diamond-rankers were freed up, they inflicted a lot of messenger casualties, especially during the withdrawal. As a result, the messengers have abandoned one of their five fortresses to consolidate in the others.”

“They don’t have a diamond-ranker anymore,” Jason said.

“No,” Vidal said. “But we also don’t have the forces to stage counterattacks. Many adventurers are still working to purge the world-taker worms in the towns and villages to the south. There was talk of our diamond-rankers attacking the messenger fortresses alone, but the defence infrastructure of those fortresses is formidable. While our diamond-rankers are tangled up in the defences of one fortress, the others could mount punitive attacks.”

“For all the messengers took a hit,” Jason said, “we took a worse one. Diamond-ranker aside.”

“That is the current assessment,” Vidal said.

He looked around the rooftop garden in which they sat, atop Asano’s cloud palace. Days earlier it had been a domed area that sent the diamond-ranker, Charist, into a fresh rage. His inability to penetrate some areas of Jason’s building with his magical senses was what had prompted him to invade the palace in the first place. The other diamond-ranker, Allayeth, mostly kept him in check, but Charist’s patience had run dry. He was not to be stopped when he had burst into Jason’s cloud palace and, even as she disagreed with the move, Allayeth had gone along to present a unified front.

While the two Yaresh diamond-rankers worked together, they were very different. Charist embraced the power and authority that came with his rank, using it to bull through any situation, be it combative, diplomatic or social. Allayeth was more subtle, working within societal strictures instead of lording over them as her power would allow. If not for the need to be a moderating force on Charist, people may not have even known her name.

The reason Vidal had so much insight into the pair was due to an unlikely friendship formed between himself and Allayeth. He knew that she had only approached him to be a lever on Asano, doubtless one of many she was cultivating. Even so, Vidal genuinely enjoyed her company. She had a knack for turning the normally imposing presence of a diamond-ranker into something compelling instead. He didn’t know if she cared at all about him, but she had certainly given him access to information he otherwise would never have encountered.

Part of that information was Allayeth’s thoughts and plans around certain topics. One example was that Allayeth had expressed respect for Asano’s approach of making the appearance of concession, even as it frustrated her. Having looked into Asano’s background and connections, she now realised that pushing him as much as Charist advocated could have greater repercussions than they had originally realised.

“I think you should sit down with one of the diamond-rankers,” Vidal suggested to Jason after his report was done.

“One of them?” Jason asked pointedly. “That implies that most of the friction is coming from the more confrontational of the pair.”

“With respect, Mr Asano, most of the friction is coming from you. You disrespect their rank. You take an entire force of messengers prisoner and refuse to reveal where they are being held. You hide away for weeks from attempts by the Adventure Society to debrief you.”

Vidal couldn't sense Jason's aura. He knew that, even if he could, he would not have been able to read his emotions through it. It was unnecessary, as it turned out, as Jason's expression darkened.

"I have larger concerns than one battle in one city, Mr Ladviv."

He was using Vidal's surname, which was not a good sign.

"Larger concerns than a city all but razed to the ground?" Vidal asked.

"Yes. You know the kinds of forces I deal with. It's the whole reason the Adventure Society attached you to me, but I find myself increasingly regretting my acceptance of that. The reason we came to this city was to fight messengers, and I don't like the fact that my integrity seems to be in constant question."

"You are keeping a lot of secrets, Mr Asano."

"As is every other adventurer. But mine are a sin because powerful people want to know them? Go back to your diamond-rankers, Mr Ladviv, and tell them to come here and answer my questions. Does my wanting their secrets make them traitors because they refuse to reveal them?"

"Of course not. That doesn't make any sense."

"No, Mr Ladviv. It does not."

Jason's smile didn't reach his eyes, but it reached Vidal's spine and sent a chill down it. Vidal had some experience — certainly more than he wanted — of dealing with diamond-rankers of late. They always restrained their formidable presence around him, and he got an unnervingly similar feeling from Jason. The experience, however, had made him very good at holding his nerve.

"There is one other thing, Mr Asano."

"Go on."

"I have been asked to request that you stop projecting your senses across the entire city. It's not strictly prohibited, but it is considered extremely rude and several gold-rankers have made complaints."

"Not to me."

That request had taken Vidal by surprise. A fellow silver-ranker being able to hide his aura completely was one thing, but doing so while projecting his senses across a massive area was another. That was something he hadn't realised was possible.

"Any gold-rankers wishing to complain," Jason continued, "are welcome to come here and do so in person."

They both knew that there was little chance of that happening. Gold-rankers had the survival instincts to not get caught up in diamond-rank conflicts, even if that conflict was

with a silver-ranker. Perhaps especially with a silver-ranker, if the silver-ranker in question was anything but immediately crushed.

"I will convey your response to the Adventure Society," Vidal said and stood up.

"That's it?" Jason asked him. His voice sounded casual but had a dangerous undertone Vidal was certain did not slip in by mistake.

"What else would there be, Mr Asano?"

"The messengers made contact with the city authorities yesterday. Were you not going to share that information?"

"Mr Asano, I—"

"If you're thinking about lying to me, Mr Ladiv, I would suggest you revise that idea."

"Did I do something to anger you, Mr Asano?"

Jason frowned and shook his head.

"No, Mr Ladiv. You just have the unfortunate role of being the messenger. I'm getting very tired of authority groups telling me what to do while trying to take what I have. It was something I put up with a lot in my old world, and it's bringing up bad memories. I need to get to a higher rank, and I need to stop involving myself in major events until I do."

"I think it may be more than a little late for that, Mr Asano."

"Yes, but I can at least try. It may be time to relinquish my membership in the Adventure Society. Now, Mr Ladiv. What can you tell me about what the messengers have to discuss with the city authorities?"

"Very little, Mr Asano. Genuinely. The messengers sent one of their suborned locals rather than come in person, probably because they knew a messenger wouldn't be allowed to leave again. They've made contact with the government, not the Adventure Society. The messenger approached the ducal manor, where I do not have any information sources."

Jason raised his eyebrows, his expression offering Vidal a chance to correct himself.

"No high-level information sources," Vidal said. "I've made inroads with some of the low-level bureaucrats, but the duke's office is being careful with this information. I was lucky to find out the messengers had made contact at all. I'm surprised you even heard about it."

"You just asked me to stop spreading my senses across the city, Mr Ladiv."

"Yes, but it's not like a messenger came flapping their way into the city. It was an elf taking care to be discreet. Unless you got extremely lucky, you would need to pay diligent and near-constant attention to numerous places around the city simultaneously to catch information like that."

“Or be very lucky.”

“Are you a lucky man, Mr Asano?”

“I would say yes, on the whole. I’ve also developed a knack for splitting my attention without diminishing focus.”

“Superior multi-tasking is something every essence user shares, Mr Asano. It is a function of the spirit attribute. Monitoring this entire city, however, would require something far more developed.”

“Yes,” Jason agreed. “What I’m talking about is more akin to how a…”

Jason smiled, Vidal unable to tell if it was in self-amusement or self-recrimination.

“Some things are best left unsaid,” Jason told him. “We are done here, Mr Ladv. Find out more about what the messengers want.”

“Mr Asano, I agreed to give you a broad overview of Adventure Society news, not to become your investigator. I’m just a liaison and you’re looking to take liberties. I don’t work for you.”

“Then perhaps it is time that our arrangement comes to an end.”

Jason stood up and plucked a folder from his dimensional space, holding it out for Vidal.

“All the identity documents for John Miller,” Jason said. “If I’m going to revoke my Adventure Society membership, I can hardly run around with the false identity they provided for me. I never did a great job of maintaining it, anyway.”

“You’re seriously considering separating from the Adventure Society?”

“The point of being an adventurer is that the Adventure Society facilitates me helping people. If all they are going to do is make demands and get in my way, then what is the point?”

“And the rest of your team?”

“That is up to them.”

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Jason ran a hand over his face as his senses tracked the departure of a troubled Vidal Ladv.

“I’m cranky today,” Jason observed. “I didn’t mean to be that confrontational. I don’t like it when the Adventure Society starts reminding me of the Network, though.”

“You don’t truly intend to void your Adventure Society membership, do you?” Shade asked from Jason’s shadow.

“No, that would escalate tensions. But I want to see how they react. It’s an option, albeit one I’m unlikely to take up.”

“Do you think they will take more care to avoid or block your senses?”

“I hope so. Given that your spying is by far the better source of information, I’d rather have them focus on impeding me than watching the shadows.”

“I can only learn so much,” Shade said. “Only the weaker gold-rankers fail to notice my presence, and even then, only when they are inattentive. Like you, Mr Asano, I need to grow stronger to handle the events in which we always seem to find ourselves.”

“But we don’t just find ourselves in them, do we? This fate sense. It means I’m seeking them out. I need to take myself off the board. The idea of returning to Earth and hunting vampires until I’m gold-rank was a frivolous idea, yet it increasingly appeals.”

“You have things to do here.”

“Yes,” Jason said, then let out a small sigh. “Now that I’ve prodded, it will be interesting to see if the Ducal government and the Adventure Society seek to include or exclude me from what the messengers are after.”

“What are you expecting?”

“The Voice of the Will has a problem. She wants something from the underground array, and she needs essence users to get it. But even if she’s in command, the rank and file won’t accept the help of what they see as their lessers. The indoctrination that controls the messenger masses cuts both ways. Marek seems sure the voice will use me as an excuse to make the messengers accept some kind of alliance. I may be an enemy to them, but after what happened in the Battle of Yaresh, they may accept me as an equal.”

“An equal that needs to be eradicated.”

“That’s probably part of how the voice is selling it.”

“Will the city be willing to go along with anything the messengers want after the attack?”

“Everyone has a price, Shade.”

“And what is yours, Mr Asano?”

“Really well-pickled capsicum, tender and sweet. I think I’m going to go make a sandwich.”