

## Chapter 696

### A Fight to the Pain

Outside of the barrier dome surrounding Yaresh, the command council, the strategic command for the messenger raiding force, was floating in the air. Information from the field commanders within the city was relayed to them through speaking stones, a magical device this world did not possess. Communication was one of several odd points of ignorance in this otherwise magically developed world, alongside their dearth of dimensional magic.

One of the commanders left the group to move in the direction of the Voice of the Will, Jes Fin Kaal. Although ostensibly in charge of all the messenger forces in the region – undisputedly, with the death of Mah Go Schaat – she had been leaving the direction of the raid to the gold-rankers that made up the strategic command. They were both surprised and grateful, as they knew their people and how to lead them far better than an outsider, even one sent by the astral king.

The Voice had been satisfied setting objectives and then leaving the commanders to determine how best to carry them out. She only made a few stipulations, although they ranged from small to fundamental in their impact on the strategic approach to the raid. Attaching one messenger to the troop most likely to encounter one specific adventurer was a confusing but easy-to-accommodate directive. Employing the great summoning gates, on the other hand, defined the manner in which the attack was conducted.

The commander approaching Jes Fin Kaal reached her and made a status report. Kaal listened without looking at the man, her eyes locked on the city barrier, despite seeing little more than a blue blur through its surface.

“...being pushed back across the city,” the commander reported. “We had believed that the gods would largely remain out of the conflict, but not only have the churches mobilised extensive forces, but those forces have proven suspiciously strong and well-informed.”

“The goddess Knowledge,” Kaal said, her voice unconcerned. “We have long known that she was preparing for our arrival in this world. She pushed the boundaries of what information she was able to spread, but our collaboration with the church of Purity has given her leeway.”

“The command council is advising withdrawal, Voice,” the commander said. “The barrier breaches are repairing themselves quickly and the defenders are taking the upper hand as the summoning gates reach their limits. They are close to breaking down and we

cannot replace the summons being destroyed as quickly as before. The fall of Mah Go Schaat has also freed up the local diamond-rank adventurers, and we've started losing gold-rankers. Casualties are already shifting away from the summoned fodder and onto our actual forces."

"You have confirmed the aura event was Jason Asano?"

"Yes, Voice. Also..."

Kaal finally turned to look at the commander.

"What?" she demanded.

"We have been unable to determine how Mah Go Schaat died. As best we can tell, he was rushing towards Asano in the wake of the aura events. The next moment, he was dead. At Asano's feet."

The Voice blinked in confusion.

"Just like that?"

"Yes, Voice. And then... Asano devoured the life force left in his corpse."

Kaal's eyebrows shot up and then, to the commander's surprise and mild terror, she burst out laughing.

"Voice, we lost a diamond-ranker."

Kaal gave him a friendly pat on the shoulder.

"And we likely won't be seeing him again for some time. Such a shame. What is Asano's current disposition?"

"One of our silver-rankers caught him in a duelling power. We have been unable to ascertain his status from that point."

"He was drawn into a dimensional space?"

"No, Voice. It was the power type that wraps each duellist in a soul shell, allowing them to fight each other, but anyone else coming into contact is forcibly thrown away."

"Then why do we not know his status?"

"Their duel moved into a breached bunker. It is likely their fight created massive casualties amongst those sheltering inside. These soul shells can hurt a silver-ranker; they'll kill the frail servant race civilians."

"The bunkers don't matter. What about Asano?"

"Forgive me, Voice, but were the bunkers not the entire objective in attacking the city? To sow terror?"

"What? Oh, yes, of course they were. What are you doing to get eyes in that bunker?"

“The commander for that district is Marek Nior Vargas. He has secured the entrance with his personal forces only, not the ones that were assigned to him. But he is denying entrance to our forces, along with the city defenders.”

Kaal’s face took on a contemplative expression.

“Interesting,” she mused. “I knew many of our gold-rankers would fight over Asano once they realised what he was, but Marek Nior Vargas being one of them is a surprise.”

“His actions could be seen as traitorous.”

“They could. But equally, he may simply be taking care in securing Asano. He’s always been a careful one, and I suspect not all of our people are acting with duty utmost in their minds. He does not act without due consideration, and he knows that only silver-rankers are allowed to kill Asano.”

“From our ongoing assessment of him, I’m not sure any of our silver-rankers *can* kill Asano.”

“Precisely.”

“Then why did you specifically direct them to try?”

“Because our people are slow to learn when it comes to respecting those who come from outside of our ranks. An unfortunate side effect of the learning programs. But now, they will respect the threat he poses and, more importantly, his potential when directed to our ends.”

“You have your own intentions for him, then.”

“I have all manner of intentions, commander, as those who whisper behind my back are all too aware. Remember that we are not in this region to wipe out a servant race city. That is why we are raiding it instead of razing it to the ground. Our objectives are greater, which is why the gold-rankers were instructed that Asano be either captured or left alive, and Marek Nior Vargas knows this.”

“But if he *is* a traitor, he might try to kill Asano, or seize him for his own ends.”

“He is a cautious man, and is unlikely to make a sudden, bold move now.”

“But if he does?”

“Then it will be an unexpected but not unacceptable outcome. Marek Nior Vargas won’t kill Asano, because that gets him nothing. And he has no information he can share with Asano that will interfere with the astral king’s agenda. He may even streamline the transition to the next phase.”

“The next phase, Voice?”

She focused on the commander again.

“The Command Council will be informed as necessary. For now, the council recommendation has my approval. Signal the full withdrawal.”

“Thank you, Voice.”

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Jason projected his will into the soul of the messenger, and the result was disorienting. His magical and aura senses showed the inside of Tera Jun Casta’s soul, while his ordinary senses still showed the inside of the bunker. He could barely comprehend what his spiritual senses perceived. It was more vast and complex than his mind could parse, with only glimpses of partial understanding.

Being inside her soul did show him enough to disprove a hypothesis he had formed while he was attacking it from the outside. He had started to suspect that the messengers were some kind of artificial race, created by the astral kings or some other beings, behind the scenes. What he discovered inside her soul disabused him of that notion. It felt messy and organic; everything was in a constant state of flux, yet it all worked in harmony. It was like hearing a hundred songs that seemed discordant, yet when played over one another, produced a heavenly chorus.

The elements of her soul ranged from completely incomprehensible to almost completely incomprehensible. The exceptions were three things that stood in stark contrast for the simple reason that Jason had a solid and immediate understanding of them. In all three cases, it was a connection to things outside of her soul that helped Jason both to find and to understand them.

The first element appeared to be the very core of the messenger's existence; a nexus hub for the body-soul gestalt that comprised her very being. Onto that central nexus, someone had placed a mark. From what he was seeing, Jason guessed that the mark was placed while the soul was still forming, like branding a newborn calf. It was placed before the soul became an impregnable whole, granting whoever placed the mark continued access.

Looking at the mark and how it was impacting the soul, it clearly did more than grant access. It had become an intrinsic part of the soul by the time it finished forming, like an internal organ. Now, if the mark was removed, the result would be a spiritual wound that would eventually be fatal.

The next aspect that stood out was what he identified as her potential. This was where her power slowly accumulated, not unlike where Jason’s essence powers grew. She was not an astral king, however, so instead of the garden inside Jason’s soul, this was a kaleidoscopic churn. That churn, however, was not growing. There was a seal

placed on it, leeching power out of her soul entirely. Once again, Jason recognised the power of an astral king at play; just glancing at showed him how he could use the same thing.

The seal drawing out power meant that Tera was eternally trapped at silver-rank, the power that would accumulate and trigger her advancement siphoned off. The astral king was taking the power that should have slowly let her grow to gold-rank and beyond, claiming for himself. Jason realised that this must be a standard practice; every messenger unable to move beyond a certain rank was not held back by some inherent limitation. They were unwitting power batteries for the astral kings they served.

Jason's mind went through what he knew about the messengers. The Voices of the Will had chosen to serve the astral kings in return for the chance to advance further than their natural limits. But now Jason realised that those limits weren't natural at all. The great gift of raising a messenger's potential was nothing more than adjusting the seal to let more power accumulate before siphoning it off.

Although startled, Jason moved his attention to the third aspect of her soul he recognised. This was easy enough because it was the mechanism that drove Tera's duelling power. As Jason was currently fending that power off with power-boosted suppression resistance. He was able to trace the power right back to the source and immediately reached out with his will to turn it off. It didn't budge, leaving him no more able to disable it than the messenger herself.

Jason turned back to the first element he'd recognised, the marked core of her being. He could feel the control that brand had over her, and realised that if he had that control, it should let him end the duelling power. It was a move that filled him with revulsion, but it was necessary. Now that he had seen the underlying mechanism of the power, he could tell that if neither of them died first, it would kill them both within minutes.

He examined the mark, seeing that it was similar to writing he had seen before. There was an ancient and mysterious ideographic language that Jason had seen other examples of. His sword had the name written on the blade in those ideographs, and when he branded enemies with his Mark of Sin power, that brand also used the same language. The exact meaning of the symbol was multi-layered, but it roughly translated as 'soul-shaper.'

Hoping his own would sound at least a little less villainous, he searched his own soul for a similar mark and found it immediately, appearing the moment he willed it. He let out a sigh in his mind when he saw that it translated to 'Hegemon.' Because, of course it did.

Replacing the other astral king's brand with his own proved startlingly easy, the original shifting into the new shape with the barest expression of his will. When he did so, her entire soul shook like a shanty in a hurricane, but he ignored it and immediately turned off the now-compliant duelling power.

He was about to withdraw from her soul, then stopped himself. He looked again at the brand, now his own, on the core of her being. He knew he couldn't remove it; there had to be a brand now or it would destroy her slowly, like a spiritual gut wound that was unable to heal.

He cast his senses out, looking to see if he could find her own mark, somewhere in her soul. It was far harder than finding his own, and not only was it not his soul, but she wasn't an astral king. She didn't even have the potential to become one, with that seal in place, capping her potential.

The most he could find were dregs of what had once been the start of a mark, but both the brand – now his – and the seal were suppressing it. Jason willed his brand to stop doing so, and it did. Then he turned his attention to the seal and found that, unlike the brand, it was a simple matter to remove. He could sense her soul already trying to throw it off, and all he needed to do was give it a little help. He channelled some of his own strength into Tera and the seal pulsed like a heart before bursting.

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Vesta Carmis Zell was an astral king, comfortably residing in her astral kingdom. She was watching servant race armies battle to the death, resurrecting them and bestowing on them different abilities to keep things interesting. When she felt one of her seals disappear, she went deathly still.

It was a silver-rank seal, one of countless, but there was only one way for it to be removed: for an astral king to be allowed into a soul to remove it.

"HALLAS!" She bellowed, shaking her entire realm with such power that the servant races all died. She revived them again as her servant, Hallas, arrived. Hallas was one of her more satisfactory experiments in soul engineering; a living soul bound into a golem. The golem was seven feet tall and humanoid, wrought from white and gold materials that would be coveted even in the cosmic city of Interstice.

"Hallas," she commanded. "Reach out to the others. I am calling the Council of Kings."

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With the seal gone, Jason cast his senses through Tera Jun Casta's soul once again, looking for the mark that represented Tera herself. The nascent aspects he had sensed

were already moving, coming together and refining themselves. He waited, but while the mark quickly took an initial form, it was far from complete. It did not develop to the degree Jason's or the other astral king's had because Tera was no astral king.

It wasn't enough for Jason to use. Tapping to his own power, he took some of his own presence and radiated it through her soul, doing his best to give her an understanding of an astral king's nature. He focused it on her nascent mark and she responded, her soul instinctively using him as a blueprint to further develop the mark. The moment he sensed her not just reference him but copy him outright, he cut off the power and retracted his presence. He was trying to help her, not remould her in his own image.

Her mark remained incomplete, but he was sure it was enough to work, given it was her own soul. He reached out to her brand, his will again guiding her unconscious instincts to replace his mark with hers.

Once again, her entire soul shook. Jason felt an immediate sense of rejection from her soul and he withdrew his presence from her soul entirely.

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Near-silence reigned in the dormitory bunker. The sound of a few wailing children was the only noise, and they sounded small in the vast chamber. The sound of the messenger falling to the floor was a punctuation mark to her conflict with Jason, and in its wake, everything went still.

The people there hadn't seen the bulk of the conflict between Jason and Tera, and while they had seen the end, they did not know what to make of it. From the perspective of those huddled in the bunker, Tera had burst in, followed by Jason. He'd scolded her in a voice that rang out in their souls like the command of a god, started glowing, and then, so far as anyone could tell, broke her with his mind.

Jason slowly descended from the air as the light shining from within his body dimmed. It was gone completely by the time he stopped, hovering with his feet just above the floor. He floated over to the unconscious messenger and lowered himself onto the floor in a kneel. This was partly to examine her and partly because he wasn't certain he could stand on his own two feet. The power he had just finished channelling hadn't crippled him, but it left him exhausted and hollow, like a pitted olive.

Shade manifested from Jason's shadow.

"G'day, bloke," Jason said, his voice straining to maintain its trademark casual relaxation.

"How are you, Mr Asano?"

“Between you, me and the huddled masses wondering if I’m going to kill them next? Pretty knackered.”

“Events have progressed in your absence. I recommend you take stock, Mr Asano.”

Jason fully expanded his senses for the first time since he had been caught up in her duelling power. He grunted, what was normally effortless giving him an immediate headache. His senses did not extend beyond the bunker’s protective magic, even though it had been breached at the point where he and Tera had entered. But what he sensed inside the bunker was alarming enough.

Jason pushed himself unsteadily to his feet.

“Shade, did you happen to retrieve my sword with one of your bodies?”

“Of course, Mr Asano.” Shade produced Jason’s sword from his dimensional space and Jason took it. Immediately, his arm dropped, the sword tip scraping the hard tile floor as his arm dangled.

Jason and Shade both turned to the still-open doors. Moments later, a gold-rank messenger floated through, a silver-rank adventurer dangling from each hand. They were the pair Jason had encountered on entering the bunker. His senses told him that they were unconscious, not dead.

Jason recognised the commander of the messenger forces in the entertainment district. Like Tera, this man dressed more like an adventurer than a typical messenger, eschewing the impractical drapery for plain, practical armour. He was very brown, from his light skin to his dark hair, to the grey-tipped brown feathers of his wings.

His aura was intimidating. Like his appearance, it was imposing but not flashy. Jason didn’t try to move as the messenger floated over to him at a walking pace, more messengers filing through the doors behind him. He was flanked by two more gold-rankers, with silvers forming up in a tactical wedge. All that power was directed at one very tired Jason and his shadow familiar.

“My name is Marek Nior Vargas,” the commander told him. “Put your sword away, Jason Asano; you barely have the strength to stay on your feet, let alone lift it. You couldn’t fight one of my silvers, let alone all of us.”

Jason slowly lifted a hand to push the hood of his cloak back, revealing his face.

“Then again,” Jason told the commander, “perhaps I do have the strength to stand.”

He floated into the air to match Marek and lifted his sword, holding it level and steady, pointed at the messenger as he made a steely-voiced demand.

“Drop. Your. Sword.”

“I... don’t have a sword,” the unarmed Marek told him.



## Chapter 697

### One Ludicrous Encounter to the Next

Jason dropped back to the floor, landing in a superhero crouch, then toppling over.

"Yep," he grunted, laying sprawled on the ground. "I'm pretty much spent. Hey, commander angel pants, what are you doing here? You know the diamond-rankers won't let you roam free in a bunker for long, right? You've kind of boxed yourself in."

One of the other gold-rank messengers moved closer to Marek and whispered, although silver-rank hearing meant that Jason heard it perfectly.

"Are you certain we should risk everything by betting on this... person?"

"We need something different, Payan," Marek told him. "He is different."

"I'm not sure that is the kind of different we want."

"It's the kind of different we have."

Marek floated over to Jason, looking down at him.

"We are wagering heavily on someone protecting us from them."

"Please tell me that someone isn't me."

"It is you."

"Then you may be out of luck unless both those diamond-rankers have a deathly vulnerability to snoring. It's really starting to feel like nap time."

Marek floated down until his feet touched the ground, then reached down to offer Jason his hand. Jason groaned, accepted it, and allowed the messenger to pull him to his feet. The messenger was a good two feet taller, forcing Jason to crane his head back to look at him.

"I pretty much get it," Jason said. "You're unhappy with your current astral king service and are looking to switch to a new provider."

"Your phrasing is unusual, but you have deduced the situation with accuracy."

"Then you're going to need quite the sales pitch, bloke. I'm not a fan of the Nazi-scientist deal."

"I would like nothing more than to sit down and discuss many things with you at length. Unfortunately, time is against us. This was not a move I anticipated making, and it is only a matter of time before my fellow messengers realise what we are doing."

Jason stood upright, his tired slouch vanishing and the expression on his face turning hard. He slid his sword into its scabbard before responding to the messenger.

"You being in a hurry doesn't change the fact that you came here to kill the people huddled at end of this room. It doesn't change the fact that good people died stopping you."

You saw what was left of this district after the monsters you sent were done with it. Even the ones that got out with their lives have had their homes and livelihoods destroyed. You came here for no other reason than to destroy. To sow fear and leave scars across the city that would remind the people here what it means to fight the messengers.”

“I was reserved in my actions. I think you know this.”

“Not out of any consideration for the people you were attacking. You think slaughter and destruction carried out with diffidence instead of enthusiasm means you aren’t responsible for the lives you’ve taken?”

“How many lives have you taken?”

“Plenty, and it’s messed me up pretty bad. I don’t imagine you lose a lot of sleep over it, though.”

“No,” Marek conceded. “I won’t pretend that I am something I’m not, but—”

Marek stopped as a chime sounded from each of the messengers present, including the unconscious Tera. Marek took a stone from a small pouch on his belt. It was strobing red.

“And our time is almost done,” Marek told Jason. “That is the signal for a general withdrawal. The attack on your city is over.”

“You think the defenders of this city will let you just waltz out? You can’t come and go as you please, killing whoever catches your eye. You think I’ll let you go?”

Marek’s gold-rank offside, Payan, floated up to them.

“You can barely stand and you think you can do anything to us? Any of us could kill you in an instant.”

“Go for it; I’ve been killed plenty. The Builder killed me. His prime vessel killed me. I imagine you’ve heard of Shako. Every time the Builder wants one thing and I want another, I get hurt or I get killed. But I get what I want, and he doesn’t. You think I’m scared of a few messengers? Why? Because you’re all standing in a triangle?”

The messengers floating in a wedge formation bristled but went still when Marek held up a hand.

“We have no time, Jason Asano,” Marek said. “I do not like to do it this way, but I will give you a simple choice. Your world has the concept of political asylum. I wish to claim it. I want to defect.”

“Leaving aside how much you know of my world,” Jason said, “you’re not talking about asking the city for asylum, are you? You’re asking me.”

“Only another astral king can harbour us.”

“Yeah. As it happens, I just found out why.”

Jason turned to glance at Tera Jun Casta, still sprawled unconscious on the ground. Marek followed his gaze and then narrowed his eyes as he peered at her.

“What did you do to her?”

Marek moved to her side in a blur of motion, kneeling to place a hand on her forehead.

“You know her?” Jason asked him.

“She was under my command, but no. You changed the astral king she belongs to.”

Marek stood, turned and looked over Jason with a freshly assessing gaze.

“What astral king does she belong to? It's not you; I could tell with both of you in front of me. But she does not belong to Vesta Carmis Zell anymore, either. I would feel it, the same connection I have. And how are you even both alive? She used a duelling power.”

“I thought you didn't have time for questions.”

Marek stood up, frowned, and then nodded.

“You are right; I do not. I need asylum, for myself and my people. I can promise you that there are benefits to be had for doing so.”

“I'm not looking for a bribe.”

“And I do not offer one. These are benefits you will want not for you, but for all the forces arrayed against my kind.”

“So, your pitch is that you'll do something super impressive if I take you in, but you don't have time to explain it right now.”

“The withdrawal has been called. If you will not accept us, we will have to leave before the city barrier closes. That will be bad for both of us.”

Jason sighed.

“Shade, thoughts?”

“He claims to need time, Mr Asano. You could offer him that, if you are willing to stand up to the diamond-rankers who will demand you hand them over. I think we both know that will not be a problem for you.”

Jason sighed again, then turned back to Marek.

“Give me one reason,” he said. “Not vague promises. Give me one good, solid reason that I should even entertain the idea of helping you.”

Marek paused for a long time, his expression thoughtful. Finally, his gaze came to rest on Tera Jun Casta, lying on the floor. He closed his eyes for a moment, opened them and then turned to Jason.

“Because you have chosen mercy,” he said.

Jason locked eyes with Marek for a long time, needing to crane his head back to do so. Then he turned, just as Mark had earlier, to contemplate Tera's prone form.

"Bloody hell," he muttered unhappily and a portal arch rose from the floor, filled with gold, silver and blue light. It started off human-sized, but grew to accommodate messengers at a gesture from Jason.

"You know where that goes, right?" Jason asked.

"Your astral kingdom."

"Get your people inside. It will keep everyone off you until we can have that long talk you mentioned."

Marek ordered his people in, the messengers looking decidedly uncertain but doing as they were told. More messengers came through to doors when Marek called them with his communication stone. They had been the ones blocking the hole in the bunker's ceiling against other intruders, and Jason's team was hot on their heels. They found Jason standing with Marek as the messengers filed through what the team recognised as a portal to Jason's astral realm. The team knew Jason in the middle of his latest insanity when they saw it, and since the messengers weren't attacking the civilians or Jason, they looked on warily from the door.

When Marek was the only one remaining, he turned to Jason.

"Do not leave us for long. Our current astral king will likely revoke our patronage, and that will kill us."

"I'm aware," Jason told him, the gestured at Tera. "Take her with you."

"She's knocked out. If she does not subconsciously consent to move through the portal, I can't."

"Then try. Or would you rather leave her to the mercies of my side, after what your side just did?"

Marek floated over to Tera, gently knelt down and picked her up. He moved back to the portal and they both disappeared into it.

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"You could have at least let me fight," Melody said to Sophie as she and Emir led her from Emir's cloud palace to Jason's. "I could have fought messengers."

"I wouldn't trust you to use your mouth when eating a sandwich," Sophie told her. "There's no way we would let you loose in a city-wide battle. How many times have I explained this in the last few weeks?"

"So why did it take so long to put me back in Asano's cloud palace? This man's is tedious."

“I have an extensive library.”

“Asano has television. I’ve been learning the language of his world by watching stories about a man with a moustache and a sleek red carriage. The gold-ranker’s palace lacks innovative amenities.”

“That he lets you see,” Emir said. “And the gold-ranker has a name.”

“And if he also had a personality instead of colourful hair beads, someone might care,” Melody told him.

Emir raised his hands to his bead-laced hair with a hurt expression.

“I like my hair beads.”

“Be nice,” Sophie admonished Melody.

“Of course, you like the boring guy,” Melody said with a groan. “Are you still seeing that Lump guy?”

“It’s Hump... it’s Humphrey,” Sophie said.

“I am not boring,” Emir insisted. “In fact, you’ll find that a great many people’s most fervent wish is that I was more boring.”

They approached Jason’s cloud palace, which was once again set up to serve refugees. Instead of just the towns to the south, much of Yaresh’s population was now homeless, making them refugees in their own city.

In the weeks following the battle of Yaresh, countless tons of rubble and ash had been collected and repurposed in construction projects that were rebuilding the city at a startling pace. Even so, tent cities still dominated, both inside and outside the city walls. Sophie, Emir and Melody had been walking through what amounted to a tent district that had grown up around all the parked adventurer vehicles, including Emir’s and Jason’s.

“You’re going to see Jason?” Sophie asked Emir as they neared the entrance. They didn’t pause in the doorway itself as there was a stream of people coming in and out.

“If he refuses to leave his soul space, or whatever he’s calling it now, then I’ll have to go see him.”

“You’re not going to try and get him to see the diamond-rankers are you?” Sophie asked. “They’re the reason he’s not coming out.”

“Not the Yaresh diamond-rankers, no,” Emir said. “There’s another one that has come here to see him.”

“Just don’t cause him any trouble,” Sophie warned. “Your wife still feels guilty about going along with...”

She glanced at her mother.

“...your old teammate. She’d be more than happy to do me a favour.”

Emir held his hand up in surrender.

“No trouble for Jason,” he promised.

Sophie took her mother inside as Emir wandered over to a nondescript woman who was splitting her attention between the cloud palace and a cube-shaped device in her hands. She looked to be a well-preserved forty, although Emir knew she was many times older than that. He grinned as he saw the frustrated expression on her face.

“I see you’re still a woman,” he said by way of greeting.

“What? Oh, yes,” she said distractedly. “A couple of years, now. I’ve been thinking it’s time for a switch again. Not a man, though. Somewhere in the middle, I think. Young.”

Emir looked down at the device.

“No luck?”

“It works on yours.”

“Oh, I’m aware,” he said. “I was in the bath when you decided to return my palace to the cloud flask to make sure your override still worked.”

“I made the damn thing; of course I should be able to control it. What has this boy of yours done to his? I know I designed them to be adaptive, but this is outside all of the parameters I set.”

“I was about to go in and ask if he’d speak to you. He’s been dodging the local diamond-rankers, so he’s been reluctant to come out.”

“They’re diamond-rankers. Why don’t they just break in, if they’re that determined?”

“They did, after the first week. He’s retreated into a dimensional space.”

“You can force open dimensional spaces.”

“Not this one. The Builder tried, once, and even he couldn’t manage it.”

“Who is this boy?”

“Someone who has a habit of being the right person in the very wrong place.”

“Really? Did he start off ordinary and get caught up with something powerful? Properly powerful, I mean, not just some diamond-ranker.”

“Actually, yes.”

She made a sound of mild surprise.

“Fate senses, probably. That would explain the strange, disparate powers I’m reading from this cloud construct. You would have to go from one ludicrous encounter to the next.”

“That certainly describes Jason,” Emir said. “What are fate senses?”

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“Just the knowledge that it’s possible to survive without astral king patronage will be a revelation,” Marek said. “It is the fact that the kings are artificially limiting our advancement that will be the match that turns the Unorthodoxy from dead wood to raging inferno.”

“The Unorthodoxy,” Jason said. “That’s the messenger rebellion against astral kings you were talking about?”

He and the messenger sat on a long park bench in a wild garden of plants flowering vibrant red.

“It is far from a rebellion,” Marek said. “You cannot rebel against those without whom you will die. But what you’ve done for us shows that we can live without astral kings.”

“So long as you have an astral king to put your own brand in place,” Jason pointed out. “I’m not going to be your one-stop-shop for messenger refurbishment, if that is what you’re thinking. We both know that wouldn’t work.”

When Jason changed the brands on the souls of Marek and his people, it was not a smooth process. Opening up their souls to Jason was difficult for them, their unconscious reluctance overriding their conscious minds. In the end, only one had been unable to will themselves into opening their souls to Jason, and he had died several days after the astral king he previously served removed his own mark.

Even at the end, in the face of death, the messenger had not opened his soul. Marek had asked Jason how he did it with Tera and suggested he do the same, but Jason flatly refused. With Tera, he needed to save them both, and even then he still felt revulsion at the act. More than once in the subsequent weeks, he’d jerked awake from a flashback nightmare. As she was still to wake, there was no telling what trauma she had survived.

“I am not asking you to free more souls,” Marek said. “The first step must be showing my kind that it is possible. Then we can work at suborning astral kings. Those not on the Council of Kings won’t challenge the council under current conditions. If the messengers as a whole discover what the kings have been doing, that will change. I am certain that some will be willing to go along, if only to use the rebellion to build a power base the council cannot undermine.”

“That is your affair; I want no part of it.”

"I am surprised that you placed our own marks to free us, when you could have branded us with yours. We were in no position to argue. It was let you into our souls or die."

"I'm not taking anyone as a slave, no matter what they've done. I'll kill them if the consequences of leaving them alive are worse, but I won't enslave anyone. Again. It was strictly a one-time thing."

“Then you will let us leave?”

“Slavery is not an option. Imprisoning, I’m more open to. Being secret rebels or whatever doesn’t absolve you of the things you’ve done. You may not care, but I do.”

“Then what will it take for you to release us?”

“I don’t know,” Jason admitted. “I’m not big on incarceration, either, if I’m being honest.”

“Letting us go is only good for your side. We will be undermining messenger power structures.”

“So you’ve told me. Repeatedly, and at length. I’ll continue to consider your arguments.”

Before Marek could answer, Jason was gone.



## Chapter 698

### The Foolish Choice

Inside Jason's astral realm, Marek Nior Vargas was walking with his friend and companion, Payan Nior Roel. Having bloomed in the same district of the same garden world, they had known each other for all but the first few days of their lives. They had served under the same commander, who had helped break their indoctrination. They had confided their doubts in one another and secretly sought out the Unorthodoxy together.

"We need to leave this place," Payan said, far from the first time.

"And I am asking you to wait," Marek said patiently. "Again. And I have been asking him to release us, but really I am laying a foundation for the relationship. It's going to take time for him to see us as anything other than superiority-obsessed zealots."

"We're free of the astral kings, except we're trapped in the astral kingdom of this one. Do you not realise what the revelation of not needing astral kings to survive will mean? Let alone that the astral kings have been imposing the limits on us while claiming they were natural."

"I do realise what it means," Marek said. "It means that our deaths will come extremely fast if we are not extremely careful. And while we can demonstrate our freedom simply by existing, we have no proof that the kings are limiting us. The astral kings will call us liars and aberrations."

"But that isn't true. Our people will see that."

"People will choose what they want to be true over what is, given even the flimsiest excuse."

"The servant races, yes, but we are talking about messengers."

"You shouldn't call them servant races, Payan. Not only will our host not like it – and there is no place we can hide from him here – but think about the revelations we have just learned. The reality is, Payan, that we are the true servant race."

"Which is why we need to get out there and start changing things."

"Which we will, but I think you've failed to realise that the most important gift that our freedom gives us is time. Time to hide. Time to plan, prepare and gather resources. No Voice of the Will to answer to. No astral king spying on our souls. That means we can finally hide. We've never had that before."

"And you would hide in a prison?"

"Yes, I would. Don't squander this chance, Payan. This astral kingdom is tiny and incomplete; it's more of an astral estate. When will you ever get another chance to see an

astral kingdom as a work in progress? You should take it all in, learn as much as you can and be grateful for the time you get to spend here. This time will pay itself back a thousandfold when we are seeking to construct our own astral kingdoms. Think of Mah Go Schaat, cloistered away in his study. How many centuries had he spent chasing rumours that would give him a fragment of what is all around us."

"But what does Asano want of us while we are here? What is his agenda?"

"You have already given Asano your trust, Payan. You let him into your soul."

"Against every instinct screaming at me not to. If the alternative was anything but death, I don't know that I could have. Pios Val Haat couldn't, even then, and it killed her."

"Yet, all he did was free us, when he could have made us slaves. He did not even leave himself a way back into our souls, which he equally could have. He had no need for schemes because we were perfectly vulnerable and he had all the power. What could he have done that showed his lack of ill-intent more clearly than that? I'm actually asking because I cannot think of anything."

"But that's the issue, isn't it? He's made it clear that he sees us as enemies. You think he wants to play us against the astral kings?"

"I think he does now, after I've put the idea in his head."

"Then why did he help us?"

"I don't know. When I was trying to convince him, asking for mercy felt... wrong. I haven't thrown off the superiority doctrine as thoroughly as I like to tell myself. But I saw Tera Jun Casta who, by all rights, should have been dead. And I saw Asano, exhausted from the effort of circumventing a duel power, which shouldn't be possible. He should have killed her. Could have killed her. He had the power and she was an enemy. Why he made that choice, I don't know. But it feels important that I find out."

"Then perhaps," Payan said, "you should ask him."

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"I hate that shadow," Charist said. He and his fellow diamond-rank adventurer, Allayeth, had just come from Asano's cloud palace. Again. Asano's familiar had politely told them that he would inform Asano of their 'request' as soon as he was able. They had returned to the Adventure Society's main building, one of the few that was essentially intact in the wake of the raid, taking tea in a private parlour.

"I told you that we shouldn't have broken into the cloud palace," Allayeth said. "He wasn't in there and it only made things worse. The High Priestess of the Healer has filed multiple formal complaints to the Adventure Society."

"We're diamond-rankers, what do we care?"

“We decided to stay here for some time, Charist. The people of this city love Hana Shavar, as does the Healer. Causing her trouble is trouble for us. Unless you’re looking to rule with an iron fist, we can’t just squash the city authorities.”

Charist’s face took on a contemplative expression. Allayeth saw it and groaned.

“No,” she told him. “We are not going to rule with an iron fist.”

“You’re the one who brought it up.”

She gave him a flat look.

“Fine,” he reluctantly acceded. “But I won’t have this Asano running over us the way I’m apparently not allowed to with the city’s precious authority figures.”

“He is a concern. Have you read the testimonies from the people in that bunker?”

“You mean where he tells the messenger to give up her soul and it looks like she does? Clearly, Asano is someone who needs to be brought to heel.”

“No,” Allayeth said. “I spoke to Soramir Rimaros again this morning. He said that force is a very bad idea.”

“Well, we’re not in the Storm Kingdom. We don’t have any places named after Soramir Rimaros down here.”

“Actually, there’s a trade town just upriver called Rimarino that—”

“Are you kidding me?”

There was an aura pulse from behind the door and Allayeth responded in kind. An Adventure Society functionary came in.

“It’s time?” Allayeth asked.

“They should be portalling in six minutes from now,” the functionary said.

“I can’t believe it’s come to this,” Charist muttered as he rose from his chair.

“If it worked in Rimaros, it should work here,” Allayeth told him.

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In a city far to the north of the Storm Kingdom, Rick Gellar was dressing up.

“They’re treating me like a translator that speaks Asano,” he complained. “This is a steaming pile of heidel shi—”

“Diplomacy, Rickard,” Hannah told him as she adjusted his collar. “We’re about to meet with diamond-rankers.”

“Oh, so now it’s Rickard. I know you were the one who told the protocol officer at the royal palace in Rimaros that my name was Richard.”

“And I know that you won’t stop talking about how Asano is always surrounded by beautiful women whenever you get near him.”

“Said like someone who didn’t have her own little crush.”

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Hannah said airily.

They walked out of their bedroom in the Geller family compound and made for the teleport zone where the compound's defences wouldn't interfere with a portal. With a sizeable messenger stronghold not too far away, the compound was always on low-level alert. Dimensional interference was normally too expensive to leave running, but the compound leveraged peculiarities of the local magic to make it work.

The rest of Rick's team joined him and Hannah on the way. Phoebe Geller was Rick's sister, now back in his team, and Claire was Hannah's twin. The last member of the team was Dustin Kettering, the only non-local. They had picked him up in Greenstone after their original fifth, Jonah Geller was killed during a failed star seed extraction. Dustin had been on a team with Neil Davone and Thadwick Mercer, who had disbanded the team while also under star seed influence.

"We're barely back from Rimaros and now we're going south again," Claire complained.

"I didn't get to go last time," Phoebe said, "so I'm looking forward to it. It will be nice to see how Sophie is coming along."

"I'm looking forward to seeing Neil again," Dustin said. "Also, being somewhere less dusty. None of you warned me that they call this region the dust basin. It's easy to get magic that shrugs off humidity, but for dust, you have that annoying air magic blowing over you the whole time."

"That's why I told you not to buy the cheap anti-dust bracelet," Claire told him.

"I'm not going to pay that much money for—"

"Work faces on," Rick interrupted as he led them through the door and into the courtyard they would be portalling from. The gold ranker, his aunt, gave him a wink as she opened the portal. This involved a gelatinous blob appearing that swiftly expanded into a ring shape, floating in the air. The space in the middle of the ring filled with green glowing energy.

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Inside Jason's astral realm, Marek was explaining what he knew of Jes Fin Kaal's intentions to Jason and his team. They were in a grassy area, splayed out in lounge chairs. The two exceptions were Marek, floating just off the ground at the front, and Gary, grilling meat at the back. The smell of grilling meat wafted over the team.

"The astral king is after something buried deep underground," Marek explained. "She has known about it for decades, which is why she had the naga genesis egg placed here. I suspect the astral king will not be happy about the Voice expending so many resources on

the Yaresh raid, but I could just as easily be wrong. Astral kings are known for massive expenditures when they want something.”

“And what is it that they want, exactly?” Humphrey asked.

“I don’t know,” Marek said. “But I think your goddess of Knowledge does. She’s been building forces up here for years, which is the only reason we didn’t wipe out Yaresh on our arrival.”

“It’s something to do with the natural array, isn’t it?” Clive asked.

“I believe so,” Marek said.

“Can somebody explain what that is again?” Sophie asked. “The last time we were meant to be briefed, Clive threw a tantrum and stormed off.”

“It was not a tantrum,” Clive said. “But ignoring that, a natural array is a magical array – a permanently emplaced ritual – except it occurs naturally instead of being crafted through ritual magic. The elements that make it up are essences, awakening stones and quintessence that have manifested normally over decades or even centuries. They just happen to have manifested in exactly the right proximity and arrangement that their magical energy interacts to produce a ritual-like effect.”

“That can’t be common,” Sophie said.

“It’s breathtakingly rare,” Clive agreed. “Magic Society researchers have murdered one another over the chance to study one. Not only does every element need to be positioned with excruciating precision, but it must do so without being interfered with in the many years it takes the natural array to form.”

“And being made up of valuable materials,” Belinda said, “anyone that finds it will plunder it.”

“It got away with it here by all the bits appearing deep underground?” Neil asked.

“Exactly,” Clive said. “The essences, stones and quintessence that make up the array will be what you’d expect from manifestations that far underground. Earth, fire and iron will make up the vast majority, I imagine.”

“The astral king knew of its existence,” Marek said. “I do not know how, when even the elf city almost on top of it was oblivious. The original intention had been to conduct a mining operation and excavate down, setting off the naga genesis egg in the city if they discovered the operation. But obstacles arose and things became significantly more complicated.”

“Complicated how?” Humphrey asked.

“We were expecting an array buried in solid earth, doing whatever it was doing. What we found was a subterranean city centred around it, with a population that had been there

for centuries. What's more, there is an astral space down there that the Builder cult somehow managed to find and occupy. They've been fighting the locals ever since. When our forces arrived, not only did we find ourselves stumbling into what was now a three-way war but Knowledge's army was waiting to strike from behind. Even worse, the effects of the array were impacting our forces. We were forced to withdraw with considerable losses."

"I have heard the early stages of the conflict went poorly for the messengers," Humphrey said.

"Yes. Significant reinforcements were sent by the astral king. That was when I arrived with my people. We set up the strongholds, but aside from the various factions in the conflict, there was another major impediment. The nature of the array seems to imbue individuals with elemental magic."

"And what does imbuing people with magic do?" Belinda asked.

"Those living down there were smoulder," Marek said. "That makes sense as they have strong earth and fire affinities. They are an essence-using people, but those who live there now are not. Centuries of exposure have turned them into a more magical sub-species. They can no longer use essences, but their inherent powers have grown considerably."

"There are other cases like that," Clive said. "Moonstalker Elves. Thunder King Leonids."

"The subterranean residents have adapted well," Marek continued. "Those who already have high levels of inherent magic are less positively affected. The messengers sent down swiftly started mutating into elemental variants."

"I bet that went down great with team 'we are the superior race,'" Neil said.

"It did not," Marek agreed. "Especially as the changes cause intelligence to rapidly and precipitously devolve. Most of the initial force of silver-rankers were lost and even some of the golds failed to escape before being affected."

"And that's when you started suborning essence users," Jason said.

"Yes," Marek confirmed. "We discovered that essences users and the Builder's converted are both resistant to the effects. Not immune, but there was no concern on our part for casualties amongst the..."

"Say it," Jason told him.

"...servant races," Marek continued. "There were a number of problems, however. One was that our efforts to recruit and suborn essence users were not resulting in the numbers we required. The other was that the main component of successfully resisting the

array's effects, at least amongst essence users, was willpower. That, as it turns out, is something that those willing to serve us tend to lack."

"No surprise there," Taika said. "That bloke you all sent after Jason tried to get me onside. His arguments sucked, bro."

"That was when the stalemate with the local forces settled in. We had our fortresses, with the Knowledge army and Adventure Society war camps pressuring them. We also had to periodically deal with incursions from below, through the very access shafts we had dug."

"You had dug?" Jason asked pointedly.

"That our slaves had dug," Marek corrected. "To end the stalemate, the astral king sent Jes Fin Kaal. She is a Voice of the Will, one of the astral king's personal servants, imbued with a portion of her power. She did not come to fight, however, but to plan. She brought the world-taker worms and the infested proved resistant to the array's effects."

"They weren't meant to be an invasion force?" Rufus asked.

"Something important to understand about Jes Fin Kaal is that she never does anything for just one reason. Every resource has an alternative use. Every plan has contingencies and synergies; every objective has alternatives. When something goes wrong, she adapts, turning adversity into opportunity. You, Asano, are the perfect example. She wants to use you, and she is keeping her options open as to how."

"She must have gotten a surprise when you sold out instead of capturing him, then," Neil said.

"No," Marek said. "Her orders to the silver-rankers were to kill him, so as to prove his worth to the rank and file messengers. His actions during the raid more than accomplished this. The gold-rankers were under orders to capture Asano if possible, and leave him alive and free if not. She does not need you captured, Asano. She believes she can get what she wants from you without forcing you into it."

"How?" Jason asked. "And what does she want from me?"

"She will attempt to use you to retrieve whatever it is she wants from the subterranean city. I suspect she will make an enticing offer to secure your participation. With you ostensibly in command of an essence user force, she can make it work. She will, of course, have plans contingent upon your refusal as well as your acceptance."

"Why me? The astral king thing?"

"Yes. The indoctrination of my kind excels at instilling obedience, but it does have its drawbacks from a control perspective. My kind are unwilling to work with what they see as their lesser. Any attempt at collaboration inevitably descends into abuse for the sake of

amusement. If they are going to work with essence users, there needs to be an essence user they acknowledge. She was going to have you prove yourself in a duel, which would hopefully demonstrate your astral king nature. Your aura displays during the raid served her purpose far better than she could have hoped."

"She's going to send someone to make an offer," Jason said.

"Yes. Most likely, she will approach the city itself, rather than you directly. Leverage their influence to pressure you into action."

"That's idiotic," Sophie said. "The city is already pressuring him, and it's getting them nowhere."

"That's because what they want right now is control," Jason said. "They want the messengers I have and to know whatever they think I know that they don't. That's easy to refuse. But what if they want something that will help the city? The people? Civic authority holds minimal leverage over me. Moral authority is harder to resist."

"Jes Fin Kaal must meet the needs of the astral king," Marek said. "It is the only time you can find her acting on a single objective because she has no choice. It's the only condition under which she becomes predictable. I promise you that whatever she offers the city, it will be hard for you to refuse."

"And the astral king wants the natural array?" Clive asked.

"There is something else down there she wants," Marek said. "I know that it is *not* the array, nor the elements that make it up. Whatever it is, the astral king wants it very badly."

"The messengers are here for Purity's legacy," Jason said. "Is that down there? It would be quite the hiding spot."

"No," Marek said. "This is something the astral king wants for herself, to the point of letting the other kings vie over the Purity relic. I don't know what, but everything else is secondary to her."

"Then all Jason has to do is say no," Sophie said. "Plan stopped."

"Plan altered," Jason corrected. "I don't think this Jes Fin Kaal will move forward with an absolute failure point in her plan, especially such a predictable one."

"Then we go along?" Humphrey asked. "It seems that if we want to have the ability to influence events, we need to be part of them."

"To put out an idea that no one seems to have considered," Rufus said, "Have we considered actually going along with the diamond-rankers? Telling them what we know and giving them what we have? They are on our side."

Dark clouds started gathering in the sky above them.



“I’ve tried working with the organisations on my side before,” Jason said, his voice rumbling with the echo of thunder.

“That is a no, then,” Rufus said. “I just thought I’d ask.”

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Marek and Jason were on a balcony on the pagoda tower at the heart of Jason’s astral realm, looking out over the gardens and buildings. Jason was leaning casually against the rail while Marek was upright, floating just off the floor. The grounds in front of them shifted and changed in a constant state of flux. Buildings grew larger or smaller, disappearing or new ones suddenly being there. The flowers in the gardens changed colours and the pathways and streams shifted location.

Marek never noticed any of it happening. He would simply realise the difference without having seen it change. He was looking right at it and yet failed to perceive it, his senses lying to him that it had always been that way.

“Why are you helping us?” Marek asked. “Why was asking for mercy what convinced you, when the sensible choice was to use us? To hand us over to the rulers of Yaresh.”

“I might still do that.”

“I don’t think you will, but I don’t understand why not. And I feel like it is somehow important that I should.”

Jason turned to look at Marek. He didn’t speak for a long time as he stared at the messenger. Finally, he turned his gaze back out the grounds.

“When I first started to realise that I was more powerful than I was moral,” Jason said, “I asked my father for advice.”

“Is your father a powerful man?”

“No. What he told me was that when I have someone at my mercy, and I’m faced with the choice between ending them or not, that is a chance to decide who I am.”

“The wise decision is to kill your enemies unless you need them for something. Kill the root and the plant will not grow again.”

“The wise decision, you say. I think that depends on the kind of wisdom you’re talking about. But I did make your wise choice. Or rather, I just killed and didn’t even think of it as a choice. I don’t know why it was different with that messenger girl. She wasn’t different, not really. A little young, but definitely not innocent. But for some reason, that was the moment. I’ve been thinking about what my dad told me, lately, and that was the moment I decided to listen.”

Jason ran a hand over his face, took a deep breath and let it out in a slow sigh.

“Maybe it was just because I’m contrary by nature,” he continued. “Mercy was the hard path and I don’t know how to take the easy one anymore. Everything pointed to killing her, and for whatever reason, I decided I wouldn’t. It’s not like I’m a good man; that ship sailed far too many corpses ago.”

“We each have our values,” Marek said. “Yours and mine are quite different, but we both, I think, lament our failures to live up to them.”

Jason nodded.

“I don’t even know if what I did to her was mercy. I might not know even after she wakes up. I may have destroyed her more horribly than death could have, but that might not show itself for months or even years. There’s no fully predicting damage of the mind. But I hope I did right. I can’t tell anymore, and I’m not sure I was right when I thought I could.”

“Then why try?” Marek asked. “Why make a fool’s choice you can’t be certain of instead of the smart choice you can confirm?”

“Because I’ve been down what you call the smart choice, and I do mean down. It only gets darker the longer you walk it. Making things worse and getting what you want out of that is easy. Making things better is hard and often uncertain. And yes, it means making the fool’s choice. It’s harder and you might get it wrong. But if no one dares to be a fool, then all there will end up being is darkness. I’m sick of darkness, and I like being a fool, so that’s what I’m going to be.”

“You do not think anything like my people.”

“Your people could stand to think more like me, from time to time.”

“I think you are right. I see now, I think. It is aspirational, yes? You want to make the foolish choice the right one, even if that always means taking the harder path. I too have a hard path if I want to save my people. To redeem them.”

“Then I wish you success. But you should know that it will be even worse than you think. Sometimes, the world will try to break you. Either you have to bend, or you make the world bend.”

“Bend the world? If that is your goal, you will need almost inconceivable power.”

Jason smiled and Marek’s gaze moved from the silver-ranker to his astral kingdom laid out before them.

“I may have just started to understand you, Jason Asano.”

## Chapter 699

### Aftermath

Messengers didn't dream. They understood the concept, but it wasn't something they experienced for themselves. It was a condition of lesser beings. Of the weak. This was what the messenger Tera Jun Casta had been told her entire life, which left her confused as she roused from dreams of her own. She didn't remember them, skittering away like spectres in the night, but it felt like she had been living them for an extremely long time.

She opened her eyes to see an unfamiliar ceiling. It was dark crystal with swirling gold, silver and blue sparks within as if filled with viscous fluid and expensive glitter. She was in a bed made of fluffy white cloud-material, which was comfortable with her wings. Her armour, once torn to shreds, was now whole.

There was no sign at all, in fact, of the fight that was the last thing she remembered. Her armour was repaired and the injuries were gone, as was the blood they had painted her with. What remained was the bitter sense of defeat, not in that she had lost the fight but that she had accepted the loss before the fight was over. Her thoughts had turned, in desperation, to using the people in the bunker as hostages. The soul barriers around her and Asano would have killed any normal-rankers they touched.

Thinking of her power spiked her confusion. Once her power was enacted, either one or both people would die. Yet here she was, and Asano's survival was obvious. She could sense the singular will dominating her surroundings; the aura that pervaded every scrap of matter. It was an astral kingdom, and while this was only her second time being inside one, there was no mistaking it. There was also no mistaking who it belonged to. She instinctively knew it was Jason Asano, the man she did not even remember losing to, and her certainty went beyond just recognising the aura. She felt a familiarity with Asano that she could not explain but felt unsettlingly intimate.

She had no idea how the fight had ended. She had flashes that didn't make any sense, as fleeting as the remnants of her newfound dreams. She needed more information and sat up, shifting her legs off the bed. The cloud bed accommodated her, altering itself as if in response to her desire and transforming into a chair. She remained seated for the moment and looked around.

The room she was in was large, more a luxurious suite than the cell she would have expected. The furniture varied from elegant wood to plush cloud-material, and it was very spacious. There was a low set of drawers against the wall, atop which was what looked to

be an array of baked goods on plates under glass display domes. The windows showed gardens outside, with blood-red flowers on thorny green stems.

There were two ways out; doorways with no doors, but only veils of mist. One was in the wall and the other was a circle occupying the ceiling in the style of messenger architecture. The room did not seem at all designed to keep her contained, but she realised it didn't need to. There was no escaping an astral kingdom; you stayed until the king allowed you to leave. Perhaps there was some leeway, given that Asano was only silver-rank, but she doubted it. Even a gold-rank fish was not mightier than the silver-rank ocean in which it swam.

How she ended up in an astral kingdom without consenting to pass through the portal she did not know, and that was just the beginning of her confusion. She felt different, unsure how long she had been unconscious. She was about to assess herself with her senses when a voice came down through the door in the ceiling.

"Tera Jun Casta," the male voice called out. "I am told that you are awake."

It wasn't Asano's voice, but she thought she recognised it. Her senses failed to escape the walls to probe further.

"Who are you?" she called out.

"Marek Nior Vargas."

The commander. Tera was only a loose addition to the forces Marek commanded in the raid on Yaresh, and not one that would garner the commander's individual attention. Messengers unable to advance beyond silver were to be pitied, with only everything in the cosmos other than messengers being more lowly.

Tera realised that she was caught up in her thoughts and had not responded.

"Commander," she said, looking up at the misty ceiling. Through it, she could only see a winged silhouette. "I do not know how to let you in. Or if I can get out."

"Do I have permission to enter?" he asked, startling her.

"You don't have to ask, Commander."

He descended through the veil slowly as she stood up, hovering just off the floor. She noted that he didn't remain floating, his feet settling on the floor. He was wearing light armour like her and stood slightly shorter, especially as she was floating in the air. His wings with their subdued plumage folded tight on his back as he looked at her with eyes as sharp as his handsome features.

She knew him only by reputation and what she had seen in battle herself. In both cases, protectiveness was his most well-known trait, followed by careful tactics and

conservative strategies, contrasted with sudden moments of bold action. Many counted him as an ideal messenger, while others considered him fearful and weak.

During the raid, Tera had seen for herself as Marek prioritised keeping not just his own troop safe but all the messengers under his command as well. She felt the sting of shame as she remembered throwing away his efforts and charging after Asano in a reckless fervour. If he was here with her, he most likely had placed himself in danger to protect the many who, like her, had disobeyed his orders.

“You were captured as well,” she said sadly. To her surprise, an awkward smile crossed his face that shattered the image of stern commander and showed the man behind it.

“It’s complicated,” he said. “A lot has happened, and I imagine your memories of the battle’s end are scattered at best.”

Tera nodded.

“I have many questions, Commander, but there is no need for you to—”

“Waking up in this place must be disorienting, and there is much you have yet to understand. Even about yourself, I see. Come fly with me, Tera Jun Casta.”

Without waiting for a response, he floated up through the misty door. As she pushed more strength into her aura to lift herself, she discovered that more than simply feeling strange after awakening, her aura had undergone a permanent change. Startled, she dropped to the floor.

“Do not rush,” Marek’s voice came from outside. “You have only just awoken from a lengthy slumber to find everything has changed. We have an abundance of time, so take as much of it as you need.”

“I cannot make you wait on me, Commander.”

“Yes, you can. Look inward before you look out, Tera Jun Casta. That’s an order. I will be here for your questions when you are done.”

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“Jason,” Humphrey said, “the longer you refuse to meet with the diamond-rankers and the Adventure Society, the worse they are going to make things for you once you do finally leave your soul realm.”

Humphrey and Jason were sitting on lawn chairs, taking drinks. Amongst the gardens sprawled around them, Rufus and Sophie were sparring with a half-dozen copies of Jason. More copies of Jason were duelling one another, floating in cross-legged meditation, reading or going through dance-like weapon forms.

"Humphrey, they broke into my home, rummaged through for the things they wanted and left. They may have only taken Taika's imprisoned messenger, but if any of us had been there, they would have taken them as well. Most likely Sophie's mother, too, if it had come to that. And the cloud palace is a hospital, for the moment. They were highly disruptive."

"I'm not denying you hold the moral high ground, Jason," Humphrey told him. "They should never have barged into the cloud palace. And I know that flaunting political reality is kind of your thing. But I'm asking you to think back to what that has gotten you over the years, and what it will get us all in the years to come. I don't want the Adventure Society giving us problems every day until we reach gold-rank."

Jason nodded.

"I still let my pride get the better of me, don't I?" he asked. "But I'm going back out today. It would appear the Adventure Society here have taken the same approach as the Rimaros branch did to my seclusion. They found an ambassador."

"They used Rick in Rimaros," Humphrey said. "Who are they sending to talk to you here?"

Jason's eyes sparkled.

"Rick again. The locals lack imagination, it would seem."

"Rick went north after the monster surge."

"And I sensed them portal him in less than an hour ago."

Humphrey let out a sigh.

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Marek waited in the shadow of the massive dome containing the cocoon that loomed taller than most of the buildings in Asano's astral kingdom. In the weeks he had been present, the cocoon building had, like much of the territory, undergone large changes. Sometimes he watched them, sometimes he didn't perceive them at all, as if time had skipped and suddenly a building was gone. Asano's realm was in a constant state of flux, with only a handful of places remaining static. The pagoda tower at the centre was one, as was the forge where the leonid, Gary, practised his weapon-smithing.

Marek had given the man a wide berth as he was not friendly to the messengers. He had killed no small number of Marek's kind during the raid and seen them kill civilians in turn. One of Marek's people had let pride rule his head and accosted the leonid, only surviving through Asano all but rebuilding his body from scratch.

Marek's most unruly subordinate was Mari Gah Rahnd, and Marek tried to find her before she went after the leonid for fun. Asano, inevitably, found her first, delivering her to

Marek to look after. A few days later, Asano gave her mouth, arms, legs and wings back to her.

Asano seemed to have an astral king's instinctive understanding of how messengers worked, the punishment he delivered was exactly what Marek would expect from any astral king. Asano could remould their bodies despite not being one of them, or even a complete astral king. He lacked the third part of the astral throne, astral gate and soul forge trifecta, an absence that got Marek thinking.

The astral king Marek had, until recently, served was Vesta Carmis Zell. Marek did not know her exact agenda, but he could make certain guesses. Zell was known for her fascination with soul engineering. It was an uncommon practice as tools were almost impossible to find and raw materials even more so. She and her chief agent, Jes Fin Kaal, were after something deep underground, and a soul forge would explain the absurd resources expended to obtain it. Marek was no soul engineer himself, but he knew that a second forge was something that astral kings who were deeply coveted.

Marek shook his head, clearing out his latest postulation. With little to do for weeks, his mind was running through one possibility after another, Without the power to leave, he neither had nor could obtain the evidence to confirm or disconfirm any of them. He was better off planning what he and his people would do once Asano let them go. He was confident now that Asano wouldn't just hand them over to the Adventure Society, although that wasn't the same as releasing them.

Marek watched as the cocoon dome started rising from the ground, revealing itself as a giant sphere that floated away through the sky. He wondered how much the shifting nature of the space was due to Asano's proclivities and how much was instability from his lack of a soul forge.

He was still watching it when Tera rose through the misty door, her expression a mix of concern, confusion and the tiniest bit of hope.

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Rick and his team were sobered by the aftermath of the Battle of Yaresh as they flew over the city. They were riding in an open-top flying carriage as blackened flatland passed under them. Magic could rebuild destroyed infrastructure with startling speed, so the city being little more than rubble two weeks after the battle told a bleak story. Only tiny pockets of reconstruction were scattered across the city, the beginnings of what would come next. Given that Yaresh had been a city where most of the buildings had been made through the shaping of living trees, it would be a lengthy process of recovery. A few trees were already starting to grow in the bleak landscape, but there was such a long way to go.

In most places, recovery meant clearing enough room for whole districts of temporary housing, be it tents or rough buildings shaped with hasty magic. These places hadn't even started recovery, simply being attempts to survive.

"Most of the population is still living in the bunkers," Vidal Ladiv explained. He was the Adventure Society's official liaison with Team Biscuit, although he always seemed to find himself conveniently forgotten. Attached to the team in Rimaros, he had been 'accidentally' left behind in no less than three towns between Rimaros and Yaresh.

During the raid, Vidal had not been fighting with Jason and the others but evacuating people from the riverside districts. His water essence and expertise in administration and logistics had made him a valuable asset there, although he couldn't help but feel fobbed-off again.

The local Adventure Society had not been happy with Vidal's inability to get Jason to fall in line, although the letter he showed the local branch director had helped. Signed by both the Rimaros branch director and Soramir Rimaros himself, it detailed some of the difficulties in dealing with Jason Asano and suggestions against provoking him.

It didn't entirely surprise Vidal when the diamond-rankers ignored this and smashed their way into Asano's cloud palace, coming out with only one messenger and a raft of complaints. With the Church of the Healer and other organisations using the building as a hospital at the time, this inevitably led to formal protests to the Adventure Society about diamond-rankers causing chaos.

They rode through the air in silence, Rick and his team looking out in dismay. The area that had once been a giant parking lot for adventurers' vehicles was one of the more intact zones in the city, behind only key infrastructure that had secondary defence systems. Those additional defences were how the Adventure Society and Magic Society campuses, along with the ducal palace, all remained essentially intact.

The area with the adventurer vehicles did have one bombed-out area, where the original refugee camp had been. People evacuated from towns to the south overrun by worms had stayed there until the attack on the city, at which point they had bunkered down in Jason and Emir's cloud palaces. Now that area was once again covered in tents. As for the vehicles themselves, many showed scars from the messenger raids, but the district had held out, fending off the messengers.

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"We're confident that the diamond-rankers won't go barging into the cloud palace again, the moment you leave your soul realm?" Neil asked Jason.



They were standing in a courtyard near the central pagoda of Jason's soul realm. Along with Humphrey and Sophie, the four of them were the greeting party for Rick and his team.

"They won't," Humphrey said. "Even if diamond-rankers don't need to care what people think of them, they still do. They operate in this city, and while they can endure a bad reputation, it complicates things for them. Not only is going after a silver-ranker a second time heavy-handed but it means that they didn't get what they wanted the last time they went after him. Going in again makes them look both tyrannical and weak at the same time."

Jason opened a portal to the world outside and they stepped through.

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Jason's cloud palace was buzzing with activity as the carriage set down on the roof. The roof itself was clear but looking over the roof's edge they saw people filing in and out of the building. Once they took the elevating platform inside they found a hubbub of chaos barely kept in order by a panoply of clergy and Asano's spooky one-eyed avatars, looking like alien creatures draped in void cloaks.

"Asano's cloud palace was used as a hospital after the attack and still is," Vidal explained as they shouldered their way through a crowded hallway. "But now it serves more as a processing centre. We make sure that everyone gets a hot shower and a hot meal before going to their assigned accommodation, which is usually just a tent or a stone-shaped building or the like. We also make sure that no unpleasant surprises have been left behind inside people. We were in the midst of dealing with body-controlling parasites when the attack began."

Vidal led them to a lounge room that was only medium-sized, but they had seen the premium on space in the building. Shortly after they arrived, a portal opened up to admit Jason, Humphrey, Sophie and Neil.

Greetings were made all around. Neil and Dustin from Rick's team were childhood friends. Phoebe had been instrumental in Sophie's initial training back in Greenstone, both of them being pugilists. She also hadn't seen Jason since Greenstone, as she'd been occupied when Rick's team travelled to Rimaros. As for Rick himself, he was looking around as if something was missing.

"What's wrong?" Jason asked him.

"Where's the small army of beautiful women."

"What are you talking about?" Jason asked as Rick's team member and girlfriend Hannah thumped him on the bicep.

"It's a little strange not seeing you surrounded by gorgeous women."

"Well, there's Sophie, Phoebe and the lovely Adeah twins," Jason said. "Is that not enough for you?"

"Yes, Rickard," Hannah said in a voice sharp enough to slice vegetables. "Is that not enough."

"I'm just saying that there's usually a gaggle of women I've never seen before when I see you."

Jason shook his head.

"Rick, you need to get over this. I'm not always..."

Jason trailed off, turning to frown at the door.

"Yeah, I have to pop out real quick," he said as Shade rose from his shadow for Jason to step into and vanish."

"The diamond-rankers again?" Humphrey guessed.

"No," Neil said, walking over to the door. "He'd have gone back to his soul realm if it was that."

There was a knock at the door and Neil opened it. On the other side was a priestess in the full robes of the Church of Fertility, with a cluster of young female acolytes behind her.

"Sorry," she said. "My god told me that Jason Asano was in here."

## Chapter 700

### Harder Than They Have to Be

“He said no,” Taika told the Fertility priestess firmly.

“Mr Asano represents an unusual confluence of factors that could potentially be used to produce powerful forces that can be deployed against messengers and similar threats.”

“I’m pretty sure you shouldn’t be trying to breed super-soldier armies. That sounds like some creepy eugenics stuff.”

The priestess gave Taika’s mountainous body an assessing look up and down.

“You’re an outworlder as well, aren’t you?”

“I have to go.”

Taika vanished through a mist door, leaving the priestess alone with her acolytes.

“Uh, Priestess Hennith?”

“Yes, Acolyte Fennick?”

“I thought we were just here to deliver food.”

“These are difficult and busy times, acolyte. It pays to grab any opportunity you can get.”

“Is adding this man Asano to the breeding program really an opportunity worth chasing?”

“While the goddess does want samples, it’s not of any great importance, no. But the goddess wants the man’s goodwill, which we apparently fostered by arriving exactly when and where we did. I have no idea how that works, but that’s why we have faith, Fennick dear.”

“Why would the goddess want the goodwill of some mortal?” another acolyte asked. “And even if she does, why not just show him even the barest favour? What mortal would not be honoured by that?”

“I think we may need to get you out of the temple more often, Acolyte Cassa.”

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The image of Marek and Tera sitting on the roof of a building was not the standard to which messengers typically held themselves. Messengers conceived themselves as higher beings, their tendency to float over the ground instead of walking on it a message that the ground-dwellers were both literally and figuratively below them.

Messengers also favoured diaphanous clothing that lend them an ethereal air, while Marek and Tera wore what looked like simple leather armour. In reality, it was a magical synthetic with the physical integrity to endure through most battles of the material's rank.

Only after an extended battle with Jason had Tera's armour turned ragged, although she found it repaired when she awoke. Asano could easily do so, here, and her cloud bed had kept her clean during what she now knew to be weeks of sleep.

Tera's senses were still exploring her body and soul, coming to grips with the changes. The most central elements of her identity had been altered and she was still processing the ramifications. She sat slumped on the sloped roof of the building, head bowed.

Marek, sitting beside her, looked on with concern while not knowing what to say. His current incarceration aside, freedom from astral kings was what he had always hoped for and never believed possible. But he had spent far longer than Tera's entire life working his way free of the conditioning every messenger was put through. For him, what Asano had done was a gift.

He knew that Tera was in a very different place. The indoctrination new messengers went through was not only still very much in effect for her but the very pillar of her identity. She was a loyal servant whose potential would never amount to more than what she was. At most, she could have hoped to find an astral king that would let her become a Voice of the Will and surpass her silver-rank limits.

Now, that limit was gone. The mark of the astral king that held her loyalty was gone too. For Marek, those absences were everything he ever wanted, not just for himself but for his people. He understood that Tera's entire world had fallen away, leaving her adrift. Added to the lingering trauma of how Asano forced her to open her soul, she had many issues to work through.

It was Marek's intention to bring that same freedom to all the messengers, but Tera had shown him that it was even more complicated than he had imagined. He was certain that, with time and care, Tera would realise how great Asano's gift was. But left to their own devices, many messengers would immediately surrender their freedom all over again.

It wasn't a simple path that Marek had ahead of him, even assuming that Asano let them go. He had a good sense of the man, having lived inside his soul for weeks, but what he had learned left him uncertain. While Asano was clearly trying to step back into the light, many dark corners remained in his astral kingdom.

"What..."

Tera's voice was hesitant after sitting in silence for so long.

"What do I do, now? Who am I?"

"That's for you to decide," Marek told her. "I know that's going to be hard when you've spent your entire life having other people tell you exactly who and what you are."

She turned to look at him, her eyes hollow and lost.

“He did to you what he did to me, didn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“Why aren’t you as lost as I am?”

“Because I long ago came to desire what Asano has given us. I just didn’t realise it was possible.”

Her eyes narrowed, her previous deference replaced with suspicion.

“You’re part of the Unorthodoxy, aren’t you.”

“Yes,” he admitted.

“Traitor,” she accused.

“Yes,” he admitted freely. “And you will be marked the same, should the astral kings find out what we are.”

“And what are we?”

“Free. Free of their influence and free of their limitations. They cannot tolerate even the possibility of that or everything about our society will crumble. You were not restricted to silver-rank by some inherent defect, Tera Jun Casta. Vesta Carmis Zell was using you as a power source, sapping away your potential.”

“You think I haven’t been warned about Unorthodoxy lies?”

“I’m quite certain you have, but what we are isn’t something the Unorthodoxy revealed to me. It’s a truth I have only now come to realise, and that same truth is inside your own soul. However much you might deny it, you are the proof.”

“Asano forced me to let him into my soul.”

“Yes.”

“He poisoned me. His very existence is heresy.”

“Look at your word choice, Tera Jun Casta. That is a word of the gods, and we both know what you have been taught about faith. What does that say about what you believe?”

Tera floated off the roof, hovering in the air as she looked down at Marek.

“You can try all the verbal tricks you want, traitor. Once I find my way out of here, I’ll return to the astral king and reveal your betrayal.”

There was no out of here and they both knew it. Marek sighed as Tera flew off into the air.

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Rick and Jason’s teams were present in a lounge just large enough to hold them with only a little crowding.

"The Adventure Society has instructed me — again — to request your cooperation," Rick said to Jason.

"Which is exactly what we're doing," Humphrey responded in Jason's place. "Beyond providing some facilities, however, there is little we have to contribute. We could take normal contracts since the monsters don't stop coming just because we've gone to war with the messengers. But there are diamond-rankers out there, hunting Jason down. As team leader I cannot, in good conscience, advocate that he expose himself to that."

"The society has assured me that it won't happen again."

"The society can't control the diamond-rankers any more than it can me," Jason said. "If they really want something, who can stop them?"

"You, apparently," Phoebe told him. "They are extremely eager to know where you sent those messengers."

"Which is where they are going to squeeze you," Rick added. "They have countless witnesses to what happened in that bunker, Jason. They saw what looked like you portalling a bunch of messengers, including multiple gold-rankers, to safety."

"And how do they explain my ability to portal one gold-ranker, let alone multiples?"

"They don't," Rick said. "And they don't have to. They just have to accuse you of aiding the enemy in battle and they can drag you out by the hair. Your connection to Soramir Rimaros is the only reason they haven't."

"Their inability to go where I've been hiding is the only reason they haven't," Jason corrected. "They already tried dragging me off."

"Is that where you've been hiding the messengers?" Rick asked. "Because it looks from the outside like you're hiding them."

"I'm not hiding them," Jason said. "I'm holding them."

"Why?"

Jason sighed.

"I don't have to tell you that, Rick. I don't answer to you."

"Yes, Jason, you do. I'm representing the Adventure Society and I'm doing my best to not have them strike your membership and haul you in as a traitor."

Jason ran his hands over his face in a weary gesture.

"I knew this was going to be trouble. Alright, Rick, you tell whoever that if they want the messengers, I'll open up that portal you mentioned and let them through. The messengers are there."

"They said they want the location that portal leads to."

“That’s a question with a complicated answer. Suffice to say, there is no other way in, only the portal.”

“They won’t believe you.”

“I’ll try not to cry myself to sleep over it.”

“Jason, you’re a silver-ranker and you need to accept that. Why are you making things harder than they have to be?”

The atmosphere in the room grew heavy. Jason and the building around them became difficult to distinguish from one another, merging into a single, overbearing power.

“Because the easy way involves giving up all my secrets and all my control, Rick. If these people understood who and what I am, they would try to take me and control me, and that is something” **I will not allow to happen.**

The room was frozen in the wake of Jason’s declaration made with more than just words. In the long silence that followed, Rick and his team looked at Jason with discomfort. Jason was not a large man, but in that moment, his presence suffocated the room.

“I’m sorry you were dragged into this, Rick,” Jason said softly. “You’ve been placed in an awkward position. You’re thinking of me as a silver-ranker, and that’s fair because I am one. But that’s not all I am, and they know that. They’re trying to make me think of myself as only a silver-ranker so that I’ll capitulate to their demands, let them take control of my actions and rummage through my secrets. They want to know why gods and great astral beings listen to what I have to say, and the knowledge that led me to the point that they do. Do you think they desire what is mine so they can use it for altruistic purposes?”

“Are your reasons altruistic, Jason?” Rick asked. To his surprise, this drew a wide smile from Jason.

“It’s a good question, isn’t it? There are things I have to do, but is that altruism or just responsibility? I’m hoping there isn’t a difference and that, when all is said and done, I come out the other side as an intact person.” Jason sighed and stood up.

“Here is the bottom line, Rick: if anyone from the Adventure Society or the diamond-rankers want to see the messengers, they can. They just have to go through the same portal.”

“Can’t the messengers come out?”

“Not until I let them.”

“So let them.”

“No. I’m sorry, Rick but I don’t just think of myself as a silver-ranker anymore, whatever the Adventure Society might want. My rank isn’t who or what I am; it’s a deficit I

need to overcome before I can handle all the other things I have going on. Arrogant, I know, but there's only so many times you can save the world before you admit to yourself that you really are special."

Rick stood up as well.

"They won't like hearing what you have to say," he told Jason. "And I don't think they'll be too happy with me as the messenger, but I don't mind that. I don't want my adventuring career to be defined as the guy they get to talk to you when you're being a pain."

Jason grinned and shook Rick's hand.

"You can take them back now, Vidal," Jason told the Adventure Society liaison standing in the corner. Soon Rick and his team were gone, leaving Jason and his team behind.

Jason let out a sigh.

"Rick stood his ground well," Jason said. "Good for him, even if the circumstances are not. Like all of you, he's been dragged into a mess on my account. I'm sorry I've done that to you. Again."

"You don't have to apologise for that," Sophie told him. "I don't know where I'd be if you didn't stick your head places no sane person would, but it's somewhere very bad."

"Hey," Neil said. "If getting in trouble with diamond-rankers from time to time is what it takes to sleep in a cloud bed and wake up to quality breakfast every day, then those diamond-rankers can sod right off."

"We're all with you, Jason," Humphrey said. "No regrets. But we do need to have some sense of where this is going."

"For now, I'm stalling," Jason told him. "I think the woman in charge of the local messengers is going to make a move, and we need to see what it is before we can decide what to do."