

## Chapter 657

### Superior

As she pelted his familiar with metal feathers, Pei Ves Kartha watched as the unnerving man opened his eyes. He rose to his feet, not by pushing himself up but tilted on an invisible slab. She could sense the way he moved with his aura, and it was not the crude inefficiency of an essence user. He used it in the clean, smooth manner of a messenger. His gaze moved up and down her body, his eyes like nebulas in a void. It did not escape her attention that they were a mirror of the nebula eye floating in the avatar of doom's body, as well as each of its orbs.

Pei withdrew her feather storm for the moment and the avatar vanished. She felt the man's aura absorb it and grow even stronger in the process. Two of the orbs were left behind, orbiting the man as they had the avatar. As the man made no move to attack yet, she allowed her wings to recover from the avatar's attacks.

He looked past her at the tunnel descending to the main workrooms, and then at the alcoves to either side of the doorway, he was standing in. The vats that had once held worms in those alcoves were smashed, the worms having spilled over the floor like a carpet. Only two circles of the floor were empty of worms, where Pei held with her orb and the man with his hungry familiar.

Seeing Pei floating just off the floor using her aura, the man did the same. In the back of her mind, she had been clinging to some hope that her senses were being deceived. Seeing him move like a messenger and watch her with cosmic eyes, that hope died. She knew then that she would soon die with it, in a hole in the ground. At the hands of a superior being.

Pei was not going to give up without a fight, however. Once more she blasted out her metal wing feathers, but this time they did not dance around, looking for an opening. They shot straight and fast, her wings glimmering with the speed at which her feathers had to regrow to keep it up.

What looked like a void portal manifested into being around the man, shrouding him like a cloak. Her feather storm fell into it as harmlessly as rain falling into a pond. He did not retaliate and continued to float in place. The only difference was the cloak was wrapped around him, hiding his body aside from the eyes that stayed locked on her. The cloak flapped in some non-existent breeze as if touched by astral rather than mortal winds.

She gave up on the attack and instead spoke to him, the rage in her voice mostly covering the tremulations.

“What are you?” she asked, despite knowing the answer. She was unable to make her conscious mind believe it, even with her gut screaming that it was true. Instead of an answer, the man asked his own question in a stony voice. His tone held no fear, no malice and no anger. It was hard, immutable and uncaring as a mountain.

“Are there more like you?” he asked. “More towns, more world-taker worms?”

“Why should I tell you anything?”

“Because you’re a messenger. Your entire philosophy is that the inferior being serves, is it not?”

She threw her spear down the tunnel and it multiplied into nine, and the nine into eighty-one, filling the tunnel. She bolstered each one with physical force by sheathing them with her aura. She felt his aura move out like the tide, stripping hers away. The spears slowed under the physical force produced by his aura but did not stop. The two orbs floating around him became shields to intercept them.

The spears hammered down on the shield and, even without her aura infusion, there were too many for the shields to take. It was the ability she had intended to eliminate the avatar with, but doing so to its summoner was even better. Without the aura enhancement, the shields did not break until most of the spears had shattered against them, but around a quarter-turned the man into a pincushion.

He was impaled many times over, even through the head, right below his left eye. Even so, his gaze never left hers. He didn't even move as the spears exploded, shredding his robes and his flesh. His cloak could absorb fragmentation attacks, but not when they came from inside his body.

Even so, his eyes stayed on hers as she conjured a fresh spear and the ones she had thrown disappeared. She dashed forward plunging her spear through his face, yet somehow, she missed.

She kept her range, launching spear jabs. He was using space displacement to defend, but every technique had weaknesses. Enough attacks and some would land. She expected him to draw the sword at his side but instead stopped her spear by the simple method of moving it forward and letting it hit him. He grabbed it, not letting her pull it away.

They stayed locked in front of one another for a moment. She could already see his wounds closing and his robes mending. She remembered the power of an astral king and had a terrifying thought. Was he immortal? Was this some kind of incarnation? It would explain the silver rank.

She yanked her spear free and floated back. Beyond putting up shields and grabbing her spear, he hadn't even fought, as if combat with her was below him.

"You are not superior to the messengers!" she said, spitting the words defiantly.

"Your mouth speaks, but it's your aura that tells the truth. I can feel your faith shaking like a naked child in a storm. By my reckoning, you are right; I'm not superior to the messengers. But in your philosophy I am. Good for us both that I don't share it. If I did, I would have to acknowledge vampires as superior to the people they feed on."

"What are you talking about?" Pei asked, even as she dreaded the answer.

"You are the first of your kind that I've met in person," he said. "I've seen familiars, replicas and encountered one through a remote-viewing medium. but you are the first messenger I've ever had placed in front of me like a dinner."

"I am not your food."

"No?" he asked, pushing his hood back to reveal a predatory grin. The hole in his face from her spear had already closed and the red mark it left behind was fading. "Now that I've seen you with my own eyes, and tasted you with my own senses, I've come to realise something. I was told that the messengers believed themselves the foundational species of the cosmos. I always assumed they were deluding themselves, but to my great surprise, it may well be true. I at least now believe it to be possible."

"Why?"

"Do you know what a reality core is?"

"No."

"It's one of the fundamental elements of every physical universe. The power source of reality. You feel very much like one of these reality cores. Not quite the same, but close. And the thing is, it turns out that I can devour life-force that has been infused with reality core energy. I found that out after some vampires got a hold of these cores I'm talking about. They started infusing the power of them into the blood they were consuming. And when I consumed the vampires, that power became mine."

"You ate vampires?"

"The meat held no appeal. The essence of a vampire is the life force, so that is what I devoured. Now I find myself wondering what will happen when I do the same to yours. You won't know, as you'll be dead by then. The very fact that I can is why the messenger claims of superiority don't hold up, according to your own standards. I don't hold with that master race nonsense, be it from your kind or any other. But how can you be the master race if you aren't at the top of the food chain?"

"You are strange. Your nature, however you have come to be that way, is powerful. But I suspect it is also unique and I am but the lowest caste of messenger. You are an anomaly, and even then, your power is far below others of my kind."

The man let out an executioner's laugh.

"You're whistling as you pass a graveyard, messenger. I can feel your fear. I can feel you trying to burn it as fuel for your hatred, and the despair that won't let you. True superiority has no qualifiers and you know it. You're reeling inside, knowing that everything you believed – the very foundations of your identity – is wrong. A lie. If you were still the proud messenger, dealing with a lesser, would you have stopped at such a token resistance? Where's the fight in you? It's nowhere, because you know it would be futile. An ageless life of superiority has engraved what being the lesser means into your soul. Now that it's you, you can't even bring yourself to fight."

He started floating towards her at a crawl, barely moving in his ominous approach.

"If you still have faith that you are superior," he challenged, "then show me."

He glanced at the conjured spear in her hand.

"Take your weapon and strike me down with all your hatred."

When Pei had tried to execute the man using the spear, the avatar blocked it. She had various ways of empowering the spear, as well as other supplemental powers, but the man was right; inside, she had already acknowledged her defeat. The conjured weapon clattered briefly on the slate brick floor, then dissolved into nothing.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked, almost begging.

"Because this is not the first time I've seen whole populations wiped out by those who cared nothing for the lives they were taking. So I'm going to kill you, eat you, and send what's left to the Reaper. And before I do, I'm going to make sure that you understand that your entire life leading up to this moment was a pointless lie. That every life you took, every time you stood over someone and proclaimed them to be below you, it meant nothing. Your life was a waste, your existence is pointless and now it will end. You will be the equal of all those you killed. I don't know what the Reaper has in store for you, but I'm going to hand you over rough."

Pei steeled her aura, launching it at the man in a last-ditch effort to fight not just for her life, but for her faith and for her soul. It slammed into an iron wall and the man laughed cruelly. She felt his aura surround hers and start to slowly suppress it.

"The messenger aura," he mocked. "So special. So unique. So powerful. I'd ask how it feels to have the embodiment of what makes you superior broken down to nothing, but I can feel it. I can feel your faith dying, and you'll follow it soon. In not much better condition, either."

Pei rallied her strength, pushing everything she had into her aura, but the man was right. He couldn't injure her soul directly, but her faith was shattered, which cut deeper

than any wound. As the source of her aura, she could no longer muster the strength she once had. Even so, her aura didn't collapse completely. Then, in a final moment of crushing despair, she realised she was not holding him off at all. He was finishing her slowly, just because he could.

The final straw came when another outrageous familiar, a shadow of the Reaper, emerged from the darkness. Her defences collapsed and she fell to the floor, dropping not just to her feet but to her knees.

"You may be getting carried away, Mr Asano," the shadow warned, finally letting her know the name of her murderer.

"Your father will get his due, Shade."

Pei realised that it wasn't just any shadow of the Reaper, but the astral being's famous wandering child. Who was this Asano, to have such a retinue?

"I am concerned about my father, Mr Asano. I am concerned about how far you are going."

"So am I," another voice came from behind Asano. It was the other adventurer, still looking in from the trapdoor. "Jason, you remember that the whole 'guy with evil powers' thing was a joke, right?"

The man named Asano turned away from her to look at the newcomer.

"Put her down, Jason," the adventurer said. "Quick and clean. You don't have to rip her soul out while you're at it."

"She is her soul, and I can't destroy it," Asano said. "All I can do is consume her residual life force as she transitions from a physical and spiritual gestalt to a purely spiritual entity. It won't be pleasant, but I'm not sucking anyone's soul out."

"Jason, what you were talking about sounds a lot like an energy vampire. Like whatever Thadwick turned into. Do you want that?"

Asano didn't respond, but his cloak vanished, revealing the back of his blood-red robes to her. The robes grew slick and wet as a thick coating of blood seeped from them.

"Feed," Asano commanded. "The woman and the worms."

On the planet that the messengers had abandoned to the sanguine horror, she had never been in real danger. She'd always been protected because she wasn't powerful enough for the heavy fighting. For that reason, she had never feared, even as she had watched millions of natives be devoured, and even some of her own kind that were caught out. She had watched them scream as they were devoured, musing over their lack of equanimity as they suffered the price of their failure

As leeches poured out of the slick red robes, Pei Vas Kartha screamed for the first and last time.