

## Chapter 815

### Unorthodoxy

The shimmering dome of aura was impenetrable to magical senses, even those of a gold-rank messenger like Fiola Min Kath. She was sitting in one of the trees, having shaped a throne in the branches with her plant manipulation powers. It was an uncommon power amongst messengers, but that rarity did not translate to respect. Messengers admired powers that worked in the sky.

Fiola had watched Mahk Den Kahla lead the other gold-rankers into the dome one after another, none of whom had returned. Created by Boris Ket Lundi's aura, the dome blocked sight and sound but not physical passage. Whatever was happening in there, Mahk and Boris did not want the rest of them to know until it was their turn. She was the fifth and final gold-ranker, so her turn was next.

She considered running. She would get a head start if she picked her moment while they were inside the dome. Boris Ket Lundi was strong, but no faster than others of their kind. She could escape if she could reach another territory, one that had more life than a desert with few scraggly trees clinging to a mountaintop. Perhaps they wouldn't chase her at all.

She could have been imagining the grim fate waiting for her in the dome, but Boris Ket Lundi had not been shy about killing their own kind. Strength might have been the way of the messengers, but it still did not sit well with her. She did not like her fellow messengers, as a rule, but that was not the same as feeling nothing as they died. Not that she showed any reaction, of course. Empathy was a dangerous sign of weakness.

If she fled, where would she go? Escaping the immediate danger was all well and good, but was it a true escape? She lacked the strength and knowledge to leave this strange place alone, meaning death would find her, sooner or later.

Indecision made the choice for her when Mahk Den Kahla once again emerged from the dome. He looked in her direction and spoke her name. She floated from her throne, the leaves and branches untwisting to resume their natural shape. She floated down to stop in front of Mahk, just outside the dome.

"Am I going to die in there?" she asked.

"That depends on the choice you make, Fiola Min Kath. It won't be an easy one."

"What kind of choice?"

Mahk stepped back through the shimmering dome, leaving Fiola floating alone. She turned her head, looking to the distant horizon. Then she turned back and followed through

the dome. Her body tingled as she passed through the barrier. Inside, Mahk was floating towards Boris who was painted in the shining gold-silver wetness of messenger blood. The four gold-rankers that came before were now a pile of corpses, their blood trickling down the slope. A hole had been dug to collect it so it didn't run out of the dome.

Fiola didn't move far from the edge of the dome, primed to flee.

"They didn't choose well, then," she said, looking at the dead messengers.

"No," Boris said. There was usually a playful un-messenger-like lilt in his tone, but it was wholly absent now. "It's time to see behind the curtain, Fiola Min Kath. You have to choose between everything you've ever known and everything you've been taught to despise."

"Which one gets me killed?" she asked.

"You tell me," Boris challenged.

She looked at him for a long time. His oddly well-fitted clothes, his choice to stand on the ground instead of float.

"You're Unorthodoxy," she said.

"Yes."

"It seems obvious in hindsight."

"So much does," Boris said with a hint of the usual playfulness.

Fiola turned her gaze to Mahk Den Kahla.

"You too?"

"I was offered the choice first," Mahk said.

"Then you are a traitor," she accused.

"Yes," Mahk said. "I am not surprised at the others choosing the way they did. You were the only one we suspected might go the other way. That is why I brought you in last."

"You should have brought me in first. A pile of messengers is not a good look from someone trying to recruit."

"I said the same," Mahk told her as he tilted his head to indicate Boris. "He insisted."

"Whichever path you ultimately take," Boris said, "making this choice has consequences. It's important that you can make it honestly."

"Why do you think I am the one who will turn traitor?"

"Every gold-rank messenger has seen the cracks in the façade, although some do so long before rising to gold. Most don't care and keep climbing the ladder. They keep chasing power on the road laid out before them, not seeing the invisible gates. But there are those who chart their own course. Some see the traps and realise they can never earn

power, only be given it. Others realise they are slaves and long to be free. A precious few even manage to develop empathy."

Boris looked at the dead messengers and sighed.

"Most of them die," he continued. "Ambitious, empathetic or yearning to be free, it's all the same thing to an astral king: a threat. The vast majority of these rebellious thinkers are put down by their astral kings before they can cause trouble. But a few manage to modulate their thinking. Hide their divergent thoughts, even from themselves. Eventually, they meet one of three fates."

Boris glanced at Mahk before continuing.

"One, they suppress those thoughts so long they stop having them and become good little messengers again. Two, those errant thoughts and feelings grow until they draw the attention of the astral king. They die. Three, they meet someone like me. Someone who can offer them a way forward that doesn't force them to choose between being a slave and a corpse."

Fiola looked at the dead messengers again.

"I can see why they refused you. Your pitch is not very compelling."

"I'm not trying to entice you. I'm going to give you the truth and then let you choose."

"Between joining you or joining this pile of the dead."

"Yes."

"Then I have two choices. Be loyal to Vesta Carmis Zell who will kill me if I don't, or be loyal to you, who will kill me if I don't."

"Yes," Boris said. "But you are choosing between getting killed now and getting killed later, and loyalty to me has a clock on it. Once we are free of this place, you will be free of me."

"To do what? Roam the cosmos until I'm hunted down as a traitor?"

"Very little of you know about the Unorthodoxy is accurate. You've been taught that we are a scant few, existing in the hidden crevices of messenger society. But where are those crevices, exactly? How can we exist at all? Messengers can't exist without astral kings, and the astral kings keep our kind in line."

"You're saying that's all a lie?"

"Not all. Messengers need astral kings when we come into being, like a child needs a parent. Where now there is the brand, they once guided us in marking ourselves. No obedience, no alien eye inside our souls. Freedom instead of servitude. That is how the original astral kings did it, those who were not messengers themselves."

“Not messengers?” Fiola asked. Her expression of shock was mirrored on Mahk’s face.

“Yes,” Boris said. “Our genesis came from the original astral kings, who were not messengers at all. Back then, there were no limits on rank because that is a function of the brand, which didn’t exist. When messengers transcended to become astral kings themselves, they were the first to institute the brand, enslaving their own kind. At first, there was war and rebellion. Slave armies against the free. The free lost. We cared about our people. We wouldn’t use them, wouldn’t sacrifice them the way our enemy did. The survivors went into hiding and the indoctrination programs began. In victory, they didn’t just kill freedom but the very dream of it. In time, the leaders of the enemy became the Council of Kings. We became the unorthodoxy.”

“You speak as if you saw it for yourself,” Mahk said.

“Yes, I was there. I keep myself from progressing to diamond because we need agents who can move without the attention. A gold-ranker is powerful enough to be an asset without being the potential threat a diamond-ranker is. Only at diamond-rank can we begin to resist the brand, which would have drawn scrutiny I could not afford. My rank allowed me to deceive Vesta Carmis Zell and reach this place.”

“How did you deceive her?”

“Vesta Carmis Zell would have known if I wasn’t branded. She was desperate for powerful messengers with elemental powers, so I had one of our astral kings brand me. She then obtained some rather hilarious concessions for placing me at Vesta Carmis Zell’s temporary service. I was hoping to have the brand removed by now, but things haven’t gone my way.”

“You’re saying the Unorthodoxy has astral kings?” Mahk asked.

“Yes,” Boris said. “I know this is all a shock, Mahk, but do try to keep up. Astral Kings are rare, but they are also immortal, which complicates war. You can ravage their resources, but you cannot kill them. They exist as universes forged from souls, which remain inviolable. They may only be a fraction of the size of universes created by the Builder, but they cannot be destroyed and they do not fall to entropy, however long you wait. There are too many astral kings for anyone to keep track of. Over time, as the number of astral kings rises, the Unorthodoxy astral kings have been slipping back into the general population.”

Fiola looked at Boris searchingly. What he was telling her was outrageous, flying in the face of everything she had ever been taught. Just because Boris admitted as much didn’t mean he wasn’t lying.

“Population,” Mahk said, echoing Boris’ word. “A *population* of astral kings.”

“Transcendents are all immortal,” Boris said. “Not just ageless, like us, but truly unkillable. They have their own level of interaction, as above us as our cosmic community is above those living their entire lives on some rock, hurtling around an ember. Diamond-rank is the threshold. The borderland between them and us.”

Mahk looked shell-shocked, not even noticing when he drifted down to where his feet were on the ground. Fiola looked hurt and angry.

“Everything you’re saying makes us seem so small,” she said.

“Yes,” Boris agreed. “The concept of messengers as the ultimate beings of creation, the messengers of the cosmic will, is laughable. A truth that all diamond-rank messengers realise eventually. That’s the greatest danger they represent to the astral kings. And when they realise that the brand on their souls means they can never become astral kings, that danger becomes unacceptable. The astral kings either have to accept them and remove the brand, or put them down. Of course, removing the brand doesn’t mean a diamond-ranker will just leap into transcendence. Most diamond-rankers set free to become astral kings fail, just like essence users or any of the other half-transcendents floating around the cosmos.”

Fiola shook her head.

“You haven’t given me any reason to believe any of this,” she said.

“I don’t expect you to,” Boris said. “I’m offering you the chance to see the truth for yourself.”

“And if I turn you down, you’ll kill me.”

“I’ve told you far too much to let you go.”

“You didn’t tell the others. Otherwise, Mahk Den Kahla wouldn’t be so shocked.”

They both turned to look at Mahk who standing on the ground, staring at nothing. He snapped out of it and looked at Boris.

“You didn’t tell me any of this,” he said. “You didn’t tell any of us.”

“I mentioned at the start that some messengers find the cracks in the indoctrination. Fiola Min Kath was already on the path of a free thinker. You were not. You didn’t see until your rank let you, and even then, you ignored it. I had to open the cracks in your mind with a hammer and chisel. You were still programmed to respond to authority so I pushed you through by force of will. But it wasn’t that hard, which is good. At least you responded to it, unlike...”

Their gazes went to the pile of bodies once more. A few wisps of rainbow smoke rose from the bodies as the bottom messenger was breaking down into raw magic.

“Fiola,” Mahk said. “Boris Ket Lundi took a different approach with me. He pointed out that Vesta Carmis Zell was not going to let us live, however this went. Not after the way we failed and were corrupted.”

Fiola nodded, absently, eyes still on the thickening plume of rainbow smoke.

“We should use a ritual to preserve them,” she said. “It’s a waste of resources.”

“I took their lives,” Boris said. “I can at least leave them their dignity.”

“You sound like one of the lesser races,” Fiola said.

“Now that we’ve come this far,” Boris said, “that is the last time you say ‘lesser races’ in my presence.”