

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.”

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.

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."