

## Chapter 686

### Win a Fight

Fal Vin Garath was not having a good day. He detested being forced to act at the behest of the Voice of the Will, Jes Fin Kaal, and this mission was exactly why. She had sent him to kill Jason Asano, but she clearly expected him to not come back. He would relish the look on her face when he dropped Asano's head at her feet.

Fal could not openly defy the voice. Like all messengers, he needed to be sworn to an astral king, lest he wither and die. It was one of the strongest drives to become an astral king, as only then could they truly stand with no one and nothing above them. Until then, the astral king had influence not just over his actions but his very being. And as a voice of the astral king's will, Jes Fin Kaal shared that influence.

Having his mouth sealed closed was a humiliation, especially when it did not even come from the king herself but one of her voices. Fal was at the start of his journey, still silver rank, but he already had a long list. When he stood at the peak, everyone on that list would pay.

For now, however, Fal was stuck obeying the voice of the astral king to whom he was sworn. He was unable to defy her voice, but that did not mean he could not undermine Jes Fina Kaal. She had plans for the outworlder and saw Fal as meat she could feed to him. But Fal would be the one to feed, and Kaal's intentions for Asano would die with him.

The first step was finding the man inside the city. He was quite elusive and the city was in chaos, making an individual aura almost impossible to pick out. Unless he forcibly manifested his aura on a large scale, which would be insane in this circumstance, Fal would have to hunt him down.

That meant starting with the most likely place to find him and then torturing answers out of the people there. Either Asano would be drawn in or he would get information that drew him closer. The best information the messengers had was that Asano and his team were based out of a large adventuring vehicle, located alongside those of the other foreign adventurers.

Fal went through the breach closest to the area. There was a large zone of eclectic vehicles, many of which were the size of buildings. It amounted to a city district comprised of mobile forts, centred around a sprawling refugee camp. The camp had been emptied, leaving no one behind and there were no defenders out in the open. He could sense adventurers inside the vehicles, most of which were unable to block his aura senses.

Either the district had minimal defenders or they were gathered in the vehicles that could block his perception.

The leader of the contingent to which Fal had been attached started issuing orders as soon as they were through the barrier.

“Watch out for countermeasures from the adventurer vehicles. Eliminate any that are impacting the monsters, but watch out for ambushes. They may have greater numbers than we can sense.”

Monsters had poured through the breach before any of the messengers, to absorb any ambushes and reveal emplaced defences. This proved wise as the defenders remained in their mobile forts, letting the vehicle weapons do the work. With the larger vehicles especially, they boasted heavy-duty weapons that could eliminate a silver-rank monster with a well-placed shot, and make a gold-ranker take notice.

Vehicle weapons were not designed to take out people or smaller monsters, however, which is why adventurers only used vehicles when hunting large monsters. Only the fact that the monsters were an unmissable curtain made hunkering down in the vehicles a viable strategy. The messengers, once they made their appearance, had little trouble avoiding the vehicles' weapons, at least for the most part. Several vehicles had more pinpoint weaponry, especially the two that were not, currently, vehicles.

Although they both completely block magical perception, the two buildings were plainly cloud constructs currently configured as buildings. And those buildings were configured for war. The messengers were appropriately wary of the two buildings, as cloud flasks were the tools of the most well-resourced adventurers. There was no telling what manner of weapons and defences they had been equipped with.

One of the buildings was gold-rank and the other silver. The gold-rank one was a dome with five heavily leaning towers jutting out. The towers themselves were capped with domes that blasted out various attacks. There were explosive fireballs and armour-piercing ballista bolts that were conjured already in flight. The most common attack was a chain lightning that hopped between monsters, eradicating one with each jump. The gold-rank attacks of a giant magical fortress were too much for silver-rank monsters.

The various attacks also had the accuracy to strike out at messengers, especially the lightning blasts. Unlike the summoned monsters, however, the messengers had exotic powers and intelligence. They used magical barriers, conjured armour and used the summons as living shields, meaning that while messengers certainly took hits, they weren't slaughtered like their summons.

The other building was a pyramid with a cup instead of a peak. Over the cup floated a massive, ominous eye. The sides of the pyramid were covered in matte-black hexagonal panels set into cloud-substance underneath. The cloud-stuff shone blue and orange in the seams between the dark hex panels.

Like the gold-rank cloud building, the pyramid had not just attacks but ones that could effectively target messengers. Some of the hexes withdrew, sinking into the cloud-stuff behind them. Rising in their place were complex arrangements of metal set into the surface of the cloud-material like eye-shaped mosaics. The eyes contained components of blue, orange and black metal, but each was dominated by a single colour. There was one eye of each colour set into each side of the pyramid, firing beams of different coloured energy.

Fal recognised that the design of the eye weapons was not native to this world, using elements of techno-magic it had yet to develop. The beam fired by each eye-weapon corresponded to the main colour of that eye. They fired in quick succession, the efficient downtime a result of combining magic and technology to create something better than either could alone.

This alone made it plain that the pyramid belonged to the outworlder, Asano, although that was hardly necessary. While the other cloud construct had a detectable aura from being soul-bound to an essence user, the pyramid used its aura as a weapon. It blanket the entire city district, amplified strongly enough that the gold-rankers' attempts to suppress it fell short. They perhaps could have managed it if that was all they did, but they needed to fight.

What the aura did was make any monster or messenger that made an attack suffer a retaliatory affliction. That affliction didn't do anything by itself, but despite its rarity, Fal knew of it and the danger it presented. The affliction was called Sin, and what it did was escalate any necrotic damage suffered. It was a rare affliction known to be employed heavily by Jason Asano.

One of the three beam colours, black, directly delivered necrotic damage to take advantage of the affliction. This was less effective against those with potent armour or magical barriers, but that was where the other beams came in. The orange ones were resonating-force, rapidly breaking down physical armour, while the blue disruptive-force beams had a similar effect against magical barriers.

The beams all ignored the monsters to target the messengers, although they mostly struck monsters anyway. There were just too many of them, and the messengers quickly learned to interpose a solid wall of monsters between themselves and the pyramid. For

this reason, the extra power and unpredictable lighting arcs made the gold-rank building the greater threat.

While the beams attacked the messengers, the giant eye above the pyramid was the most effective weapon for eliminating monsters in the district. Its gaze took the form of a massive beam that grew wider the further it projected. The beam itself was barely visible, a heat-haze shimmer tinted faintly blue. The results were likewise subtle, with no immediate impact. What it did was bestow afflictions, what Fal suspected to be the ones in Asano's own repertoire.

The messengers were able to easily avoid the eye's gaze, but it affected the monsters in droves. After the eye's gaze had moved on, the monsters left behind were soon melting in the sky, gobbets of wet flesh rotting away to fall like raindrops. Even with the lack of empathy quintessential to messengers, it was a horrifying sight. The information they had on Asano suggested a foolish hero complex, but this was not the power of a hero. It wasn't even the power of a villain. As dead flesh rained across the entire city district, it felt like the punishment of a vengeful god.

Fal scoffed at his own thought. Messengers were not afraid of gods and Asano was not one in any case, even if his pyramid felt like a temple. Despite its bizarre power, he knew the building could not project Asano's aura without Asano being present, meaning he had found his target. A soul-bound item lacked a strong enough connection to the soul to be a source of the true aura being projected by the building. Asano had to be inside, using the building to amplify his power.

The messengers continued to throw their summons at the vehicles below, cannon fodder they were happy to let die. While the defenders had not yet been forced to emerge, their weapons proving so successful, the situation could only be sustained for so long. Most weapons on adventurer vehicles were designed to fend off the odd monster attack and make the occasional hunt. They were not built for war and the sustained fire they were currently pumping out. Whether their power supplies ran low or the weapons were overtaxed and shut down, they would only last so long.

Fal guessed there would be a few exceptions, almost certainly including the two cloud buildings, But inevitably, most of the vehicles would stop firing before the summoned monsters stopped coming. Then the defenders would show themselves, and things would go badly for them. This particular attack force included a higher proportion of gold-rankers than normal, so they could reliably break into the vehicles once they were exposed.

Fal had his own mission that only required cracking open one of the vehicles. He sought out the gold-rank commander of the messenger forces.

“We need to invade the pyramid,” Fal told him. “The outworlder, Jason Asano, is in there. The Voice of the Will wants—”

“I agree,” the commander said, cutting him off. Fal had been expecting more of an argument.

“The voice made it clear that Asano is the priority in this zone,” the commander continued. “My orders are to facilitate a confrontation between you and Asano where you can use your isolation power to duel him. Even if they weren’t, that pyramid is a problem. It isn’t as much of a threat to ourselves as the gold-rank cloud building, but it’s killing the summons far too quickly. I want it dealt with before the adventurers are forced to come out and face us, so we have as much fodder as possible.”

“You’ll gather the gold-rankers for an attack, then?” Fal asked. The higher percentage of gold-rankers reflected Jes Fin Kaal’s priorities.

“My information is that Asano is arrogant and likes to make public demonstrations. You may be able to lure him from the building for a duel. If you kill him, his building will be greatly diminished, perhaps even going dormant entirely. If he kills you, we will catch him outside the building if we can and chase him into it if we can’t.”

The commander was testing his nerve. It was clear enough that the man was one of the voice’s lackeys, which was shameful for a gold-ranker. His job involved making sure that Fal did as instructed. Fal didn’t care, as he only had to do one thing to spite the commander and the foul woman he served: win a fight.