

Chapter 690

Heretic

There was a single diamond-ranker amongst the messenger forces, Mah Go Schaat. He had no interest in the astral king's goals, and longed for the day he would no longer have to take the woman's directives. He was already powerful enough that she could only ask so much of him, and he gave no more than was strictly required. He was still bound to her service, however, until he finally found the path to astral king for himself. In the meantime, he was stuck servicing her agenda, as delivered through her Voice of the Will, Jes Fin Kaal.

He was under no requirement to handle any issues below diamond-rank. In his current deployment, this meant countering the native diamond-rankers when they participated in raids on the messenger strongholds. Now that the messengers were the ones on the attack, he would be part of it. The diamond-rank adventurers would doubtlessly participate in the defence of their city, meaning that Schaat was obligated to join the attack.

The natives had two diamond-rankers. They were weak for the rank, but Schaat was not a fool. He knew that even the weakest diamond-ranker was one of the deadliest entities in any world, even if they weren't a messenger. He had no intention of taking them lightly, and if the attack plan had not involved softening them up with an apocalypse beast, he would not have participated at all. His obligations to the astral king did not include suicide missions, which meant that Jes Fin Kaal had been careful to hide that this mission was exactly that.

Schaat did not realise the duplicity of the voice until he breached the barrier from above and his senses spread across the city. He didn't care about the operation, or how it served the astral king's goals. Beyond what the astral king demanded of him, Schaat didn't care at all. Even so, using four life-forge gates to attack this unimportant city struck him as wasteful. He had wondered what the voice saw in the place that was worth the expenditure, but not enough to interact with his lesser and ask. It was only after he breached the barrier from above that he realised he should have.

With the barrier stained blue and covered in monsters like bees on honeycomb, he could not see inside. Neither did his formidable magical senses reach through the barrier, such was the strength of such a formidable emplacement. The presence of the garuda had been hidden from him.

That the garuda was here now, right as the genesis egg was activated, was too staggering a coincidence. Someone who knew about the egg must have leaked that information at just the right time to coincide with the attack. As a result, the diamond-rankers had been spared from pushing into that chaotic clash.

That left the question of what anyone got from leaking that information. The answer, to Schaat's mind, was obvious: it got him. He was inside the barrier, now, with two diamond-rankers to deal with. As for who had set it up, that was equally obvious.

While the management of the astral king's local operations fell to Jes Fin Kaal, she was ultimately a gold-ranker, Voice of the Will or not. She had neither the power nor the right to overrule Schaat on almost any matter, should he take an interest. Nor could she make major decisions without passing them by him. He had been willing to overlook the costly life-forge gates because he liked that she didn't bother him with every little thing. But he now understood that he should have paid more attention.

Schaat had been expecting the native diamond-rankers to have expended significant resources fighting the naga genesis egg, making them easy picking for Schaat to deal with. Instead, he found a gods-bedamned garuda eating the egg like it was breakfast, the remains of countless serpents demonstrating the epic battle it had waged on the egg's spawn to reach that point. Even now, giant serpents attacked the garuda while smaller ones rushed off into the city. The garuda allowed it for the moment as it finished off the egg, tearing chunks off with its beak, which would cut off the serpents at the source.

The entire raid was a trap. It was an assassination attempt disguised as a city invasion, so that Schaat would die and Jes Fin Kaal would no longer be under his thumb.

It grated, but did not surprise, that the astral king permitted this. The Voice of the Will would never go after a diamond-ranker without her approval, however deniable the plan might be. Schaat avoided politics entirely, so he had no idea what schemes Kaal and the astral king were working on. He was focused on becoming an astral king himself, but clearly, he had been remiss in his narrow focus. While he had been in study, she had obviously been making back-handed deals that would forestall any backlash from the upper-tier messengers at the attempt to kill him off. Arranging the death of a diamond-ranker was no small thing, even if it was unlikely to stick.

Schaat's first thought had been to abandon the raid. The barrier breach was right there, as he had just made it. But that, in itself, was a trap. He was obligated to participate in the attack because of the diamond-rank adventurers and the garuda's presence didn't change that. Kaal would deny arranging events, and now that Schaat had joined the fray, flight would be seen as cowardice. Kaal could claim he fled in fear and have him neatly

removed from authority, which equally got her what she wanted. If anything, that was an ideal outcome for her, as it avoided any chance of backlash from getting him killed.

Only if Schaat could prove she arranged everything would he have a case to defend his reputation, and it would not entirely erase the sting of having fled. Kaal was also not sloppy enough to leave threads for him to pull on after the fact. If things had reached this stage, he was certain she had already cleaned up after herself.

That left Schaat with an unenviable choice. If he left, he would be safe but disgraced. While he did not enjoy his responsibilities, the authority that came with them was essential to his efforts in becoming an astral king. If he was branded a coward, his status as a diamond-ranker would hold less weight, leaving him even more subject to the astral king's control.

The only option that remained was to fight. Fortunately, the garuda would not participate. He was here for the serpents and no garuda would fight on Kaal's behalf. Schaat imagined the garuda had seen through Kaal's manipulations and only gone along with them enough to get what he wanted. Kaal would get no more out of him, of that Schaat was certain.

That still left two diamond-rank adventurers. Schaat had clashed with both in the past and was confident that he could deal with either one alone, but not both together. They knew his strength as well, and working as a pair in their own territory, they would be able to fight him to a stalemate. For them, keeping him from rampaging through their gold rankers was enough.

This was not a situation where Schaat could kill one quickly and move on to the other before the first revived. Even if the one he killed lacked a power to accelerate his resurrection, there was no way to kill a diamond-ranker quickly. It was why the high-rank effects of assassination powers moved away from damage and into escape prevention and revival negation.

Killing diamond-rankers took planning. Getting them to stay dead was often the result of decades, if not centuries of elaborate plotting. Schaat was confident that even if he died here, the most Kaal could have arranged was for his resurrection to be delayed, not shut down entirely. That would have been too traceable, and all she needed was him gone long enough to carry out her plans, whatever they were. Whether he was trapped in death for a while or disgraced into irrelevance, she got what she wanted.

He wasn't going to let that happen.

Schaat still had certain advantages. Even if he was just stumbling onto Kaal's schemes, he could interpolate weaknesses based on what her schemes would have had

by necessity. She wouldn't be able to get the garuda or the diamond rank adventurers to actively participate in her plans as that would be too easy to trace back to her. Instead, she would have had to align their agendas with hers, which could only go so far.

Schaat considered the people in play. The garuda knew better than to interfere too heavily in a universe the World-Phoenix had isolated from the wider cosmic community. Although they were famously individualistic, they would not fly in the face of a great astral being's agenda the way the messengers would.

The World-Phoenix would not object to it hunting down the naga genesis egg, as that was their purview. It would even allow some nudging of locals in one direction or another, in moderation, but starting a war with the messengers was too far. The messengers had paid a price for defying the World-Phoenix and invading this world that the garuda would not. As for the diamond-rank adventurers, they would be satisfied if Schaat left their city, having no need to see him dead.

The path to frustrating Jes Fin Kaal's plans, then, was to stall. He couldn't ignore the diamond-rank adventurers or the voice would rightly claim dereliction of responsibility. But he didn't have to kill them, or even really hurt them. All he had to do was occupy them, keeping them off the gold-rank messengers. So long as he did that, he could ignore everything else and then withdraw with the rest of the messenger forces at the end of the raid.

He would accomplish no more than the bare minimum in assisting the raid, making sure the diamond-rankers were occupied and no more. He had no investment in the operation even before it turned out to be a pretence to kill him. If he came out unscathed, and the voice claimed he hadn't done enough, he could simply state that the adventurers were too challenging. No, why sacrifice his pride over it? He would claim that the voice's plan was flawed. If anything, the more messengers that died, the worse Jes Fin Kaal looked. So long as those deaths weren't laid at his door, it was the first step in turning the tables on Kaal and having her removed.

He wouldn't be allowed to kill her outright, as she belonged to an astral king. But this was the start of a path by which he could reveal her machinations and duplicities, forcing the astral king to revoke her protection. It meant dirtying his hands in politics, but after this, he would do just that. He could wash them clean in her blood when she was the one disgraced and he was finally free to kill her.

Schaat engaged the diamond-rank adventurers, as was required. He was overtly cautious, his opponents quickly realising that he was stalling for time. They were

suspicious of diamond-rank reinforcements, at first, but eventually realised the truth: that he wanted to leave the city as much as they wanted him to go.

Both sides still clashed. Schaat had to keep up appearances and the adventurers would not leave him be in case his disinterest was a ploy. They took no incautious chances, fully expecting a no-score draw once the raid was done. If they could avoid a diamond-ranker rampaging through the city, they would. The garuda was closer to fighting for them than not, and yet had done more damage than all the messengers and their summoned monsters combined.

The intermittent combat, with neither side overcommitting, left Schaat with the spare attention to watch the city with his magical senses. Some of the more powerful gold-rankers – from either side – might have been tempted by the voice to intervene, despite the danger. Reaching diamond rank was not as hard as transcending it, but it was still a threshold that most failed to cross. The insight an astral king's servant could offer, garnered from her mistress, would sway the hearts of many.

There was no sign of further duplicity, however, and Schaat did not expect it to appear. The temptation to keep adding more complexity to a plan was how it unravelled, and Schaat acknowledged that Kaal was not so foolish. But the gold-rank adventurers seemed to be paying their diamond-ranked compatriots very little attention, concentrating on the defence of their city. As for the messengers, they were revelling in getting back at the servant races. Schaat could only agree that the servant races needed to be shown their places after having the temerity to attack messenger strongholds.

Marek Nior Vargas caught his eye, the gold-rank commander seeming to have as little interest in the attack's success as Schaat himself. Schaat saw the man as a potential rival, should he ever reach diamond. He was smart, straightforward and mostly avoided politics. He also hated Jes Fin Kaal, meaning that of all the commanders, he was the least likely to be part of her plot. Schaat didn't entirely dismiss the possibility, though, as strange things were happening in the commander's battlefield.

Although remaining slightly wary of Marek, Schaat dismissed the strange activity as it was only occurring amongst the silver-rankers. While some gold-ranker could potentially pose a threat, however negligible, nothing from two ranks below could be a danger. Nothing from two ranks down could even surprise him, or so he thought until he sensed something in Marek's zone. It was close to the ground, some manner of ritual magic, but not of a kind that should exist in this world.

It was a kind of magic he had only encountered in his studies of transcendent power, in his pursuit of astral king status. More astoundingly – he would say impossibly, if not

sensing it at that very moment – it was silver rank. How was anyone in this world, even the diamond-rankers, using intrinsic-mandate magic?

"Kaal, what did you do?" he muttered with a grin. It didn't matter what she was scheming now, because this was a step too far.

"No," he corrected himself, realising that Kaal was not behind it. There was no way she would risk getting caught dabbling with intrinsic-mandate magic as a Voice of the Will. Even if she was careful and used foes of the messengers as proxies, it was too dangerous. If the astral king she served found her meddling with a different higher-order power, her privileged position and everything that came with it would be instantly revoked.

This made whoever or whatever was using that magic a curiosity. Not a threat, as it was still silver-ranked, but perhaps a warning of greater threats to come. He wondered if the garuda was behind it. It wouldn't make a lot of sense, but the messengers, the garuda and the naga genesis egg were the only cosmic-level forces in play. If it was actually coming from some local silver-ranker, that represented something outside of Schaat's knowledge, experience or studies.

Schaat waited for the magic to trigger, hoping the result would give him more clues. If he was smart about it, he could potentially leverage this to get his revenge on Jes Fin Kaal. He absently wondered how they were even feeding it the required power. Examining it with his senses, he discovered it was some manner of aura projection ritual, and immediately wondered why. It would only be able to affect a silver-rank aura, and what silver-rank aura was worth that kind of magic?

The answer exploded across the city, blanketing every battlefield inside the barrier. It was the most comprehensive aura projection Schaat had ever encountered, fully revealing every nuance of the projected aura. And the aura itself was startling, from the strength relative to its rank to the scars that marked it. They spoke of spiritual battles no silver-ranker should have encountered, let alone, endured. Each one told a story of tribulations faced and overcome. Gods and great astral beings; unwinnable fights and world-shaking resolve.

There was more to it, as well. The base nature of the aura was a grab-bag of cosmic forces. The gestalt nature of the messengers and the nascent realm of an astral king. The spiritual domains of divine territory and the intrinsic mandate of the great astral beings.

Schaat was staggered at what he was sensing. This was the embryo of something beyond monstrous. It was a power that crossed cosmic lines; a myth from before the sundering. He doubted that anyone else on the battlefield even realised what they were sensing.

There were five diamond-rank beings in the city, counting the garuda and the remnants of the egg. Normally, any aura ranked below theirs would shrivel back like a withering plant. A silver rank aura should be washed away like words in the sand as the tide rolled in, yet it did not. It could certainly not push back such auras, but it shared the space they occupied, utterly unyielding.

Schaat knew that the messengers throughout the city would be rattled. They wouldn't understand all of what the aura contained, but what they could was enough. That it possessed their gestalt physical-spiritual nature meant that it shared their inherent superiority. Some might even think it was one of them.

That realisation was nothing, however, next to the unmistakable nature of an astral king. Mortals might not recognise it, but no messenger could miss it, even if the astral realm behind it was incomplete. It was an astral king, at silver rank, flying in the face of everything the messengers knew. It mocked their ambitions, everything they strove for. Only those who knew the origin of their kind would realise what the owner of that aura was. But as Schaat himself had only uncovered that secret in his studies of transcendent power, he was likely the only messenger on the field that did.

Across the city, messengers froze in place. Even some of the gold-rankers were affected. It wasn't any kind of magical compulsion, and it certainly couldn't suppress their interlinked auras. It was simple shock. The very existence of whatever was behind that aura was a challenge to everything the messengers believed about themselves, their ambitions and the superiority that defined them.

Schaat was past the blind indoctrination of his youth. He knew the origins of his kind and the lies that governed their society. He knew that the messengers, as a whole, were not inherently superior. Superiority was for individuals, like him. But for those blinded by self-aggrandisement, being confronted by someone that seemed to share their nature, yet was an astral king at silver-rank, in defiance of it? He knew that for those without the will to adapt, it would be an almost religious experience, and not a positive one.

Messengers neither worshipped gods nor venerated great astral beings. They obeyed the astral kings, but did not pray to them. Messengers worshipped themselves and their faith was towering. But for messengers all across the city, that tower had just shifted at the foundations.

Although it felt like an eternity, the strange stillness that spread over the city lasted only a fleeting moment. Barely a second went by before the messengers were moving again, most now overtaken with rage. The gold-rankers held themselves together but many of the silver-rankers were behaving strangely.

A few scattered handfuls were listless, not resuming the fight. Around half of the silver-rankers were doing the opposite and going berserk. Some left their battlefields to seek out the source of the aura. Others were too caught up in fights and launched themselves at their enemies in frothing zeal.

The messengers, who had no religion, had found their first heretic.