

## Chapter 656

### Apocalypse

Buried beneath a town where the populace had been body-snatched by parasitic worms was a hidden chamber. The messenger, Pei Vas Kartha, had been operating there for months, luring the town elders into what they had believed to be lucrative-but-ordinary treason. They had helped her to magically excavate under a building, in the dead of night, installing the facility.

The hidden chambers were topped by an ordinary building, with the unordinary doors set into the brick wall of a basement otherwise made of hard-packed dirt. The doors led to a tunnel and then stairs going down to the main facility. There, Pei had bred more worms from the initial stock she was given, preparing to take over the town. She started with one breeding vat in a hidden room, so as not to spook her accomplices, but when the elders grew wary, they became the first worm hosts.

After that, the vat came out into the main chamber and Pei's operations expanded. More vats were added, along with implantation chambers to implant the local elves in batches. The actual implantation of the town was accomplished in only a few days, the time spend breeding a worm supply paying off handsomely. Once enough of the town had become hosts, they were able to monitor the others and lure in any visitors.

Pei herself was not immune to the worms, but the vats, chambers and tubes allowed them to be moved around without setting them loose. As a failsafe, she had the orb created by the messenger who had given her the initial batch of worms. A similar device was in the possession of every messenger infiltrating the towns and villages along the southern reaches of Yaresh.

After months of everything going exactly to plan, genuine trouble was overdue. Even the adventurers that arrived had been successfully swept up. The real threat began with a dangerous aura that washed over the town above, now fully converted to worm hosts.

The man to whom that aura belonged had somehow found her hidden facility and had been about to kick the doors open. By that time, however, Pei had long-ago installed worms vats by the door, rigged to the magical alarm. The man had been buried in worms but she decided to finish him off anyway. His aura had been like nothing she'd ever experienced and she needed him dead if only to quash the insidious doubts it had infested her with.

Although the man was unconscious, worms digging through his body, even his passive aura was incredibly hard to read. What she could glean from it only unnerved her

more. She moved to strike, conjuring her spear. She could sense the other adventurer in the building above, but dismissed him. His aura marked him as a capable but ordinary adventurer. It was the anomaly on the ground in front of her that needed to be eradicated.

What came next only solidified her certainty that the man needed to die. She casually deflected a wand beam from above and brought her spear down, only to have it blocked. The unconscious man had an avatar of doom as a familiar, which was shocking enough on its own to warrant reporting this man to the messenger leadership.

There were very few forces that the messengers actively avoided. Even the agents of most great astral beings were opponents to be wary of, but not to back away from. Amongst the very few forces that the messengers were careful to avoid belonged to the Eye of Annihilation and the Sundered Throne. These were the only two forces known to regularly employ the reality assassins, the avatars of doom. While it wasn't unheard of to see them elsewhere, it was rare enough to warrant very close attention. And now one of them was floating in front of her, protecting a man that worms would soon take over.

The avatar was only a familiar, restricted to Pei's own silver rank. Otherwise, she would have been annihilated in an instant. The beams it shot at her were resonating force; unpleasantly penetrative but not the transcendent damage the avatars possessed at diamond rank. They burrowed into the magical metal she transformed her wings into as shields, but did not punch through them immediately.

The messenger withdrew into the tunnel, not wanting to face the avatar and the other adventurer, shooting beams through the trapdoor. She retaliated by firing a swarm of feathers from her wings that danced around, attacking from every angle. This forced the avatar to switch its orbs from beams to barriers, and it seemed satisfied to remain on the defensive, shielding its summoner. She knew this was a mistake on its part, as the worms inside the man would soon take him over.

Even knowing this, the man on the ground had Pei shaken, despite what had to be his inevitable demise. Did the avatar know something that she didn't? This rank-diminished avatar was not her match and she kept her senses trained on the man it was protecting. The other adventurer was staying above, likely wary of the worms, but the worms were not behaving as they should.

Her withdrawal should have had the worms swarming back over the man, who was no longer warded by the orb she carried. But, if anything, they had started avoiding him more than the orb. The individual worms were mindless creatures, directed by the intelligent brood mother in the chambers below. Yet she sensed that they were scared of him when fear should not have been possible at all.

That was when things got worse. Not just the worms around the man but the worms inside him started radiating fear and she sensed them struggling to escape. They started digging out of his body, dozens of them, but they were yanked back as if something inside was devouring them. Then one managed to escape and something came out to get it. When she saw the large leech with the ringed rows of lamprey teeth, a chill ran through her body.

Messengers were the pinnacle beings of the cosmos, dominating the sky of countless worlds. Now the messenger Pei Vas Kartha found herself in a hole in the ground, stricken with... fear? Having felt it in others but never in herself she could not be sure.

She was surrounded by dangerous creatures. One was an apocalypse beast swarm that conquered worlds from the inside of their populations, and would hollow her out like any lesser being if they got the chance. The creatures were piled up around the walls, held off only by the magical orb in her hand. But for all that such creatures had conquered worlds, they alone weren't close to enough that she would fear them. They might be the nightmare of entire civilisations, but to the messengers, they were just another weapon.

It was the being in front of her that made her scared for the first time even though he lay unconscious on the ground. He had been drowned in the apocalypse worms and should be quite thoroughly dead. Yet the creatures were even more fearful of him than of the orb she was holding, climbing the walls and digging into the dirt to escape him.

The worms had burrowed into the man, as was their nature, but they had found something inside him even more terrifying than themselves. Pei Vas Kartha had seen it and understood immediately. It was not the first time she had seen a sanguine horror.

Even though she was the lowest caste of messengers, never surpassing silver rank, Pei had seen many worlds. She had joined numerous conquests, serving minor but valuable roles, such as worm breeder. In her experience, she had encountered worlds ravaged by apocalypse beasts of different types. Fungal vultures that devoured the atmosphere, choking out the inhabitants. Primeval serpents that burrowed into the core of planets, triggering a volcanic apocalypse that choked with ash, cutting off the sun.

The messengers knew these apocalypse beasts. Many, they even used themselves, deploying them as weapons of mass destruction. This was the case with the world-taker worms as well. But some apocalypse beasts were never used. Too uncontrollable and too hard to stop if they got loose, the danger was not worth the reward. When Pei saw the sanguine horror crawl out of the man in front of her and devour the world-taker worm she was shaken. First an avatar of doom, and now this?

Only once had Pei seen a world where a sanguine horror had been loosed. Conquered by the messengers, the native population had summoned a sanguine horror from whatever nightmare realm where the Limitless Legion met the Final Domain. The natives had believed they could control the swarm monster and use it to drive the messengers off their planet. They had been half right. A sanguine horror was hunger incarnate, and once it reached its full strength, the only way to stop it was to starve it out. It multiplied too fast, devouring life to fully replenish itself from even a single leech.

The surviving messengers, including Pei, had abandoned the planet. They hadn't taken any of the natives as slaves because there weren't any left. She had been shaken to her core by the experience, and not just from the horrors she had witnessed. It was the first time she had seen the messengers run.

It was not that they could not fight the sanguine horror. Pei had slaughtered countless of the leech-lampreys herself, let alone the higher-caste messengers of gold and diamond rank. But no matter how many they killed, they didn't stop. They would sweep through a town, devouring every living thing. The people, the animals, the plants. They dug up the roots in the ground and consumed the algae growing in the wells. Everything they consumed was fuel to increase the leech mass.

The messengers had started burning whole cities in the path of the swarm, like a fire break before an inferno. They tried to isolate the swarm from its food supply so they could cut off its ability to reproduce. They were partially effective, reducing the swarm's size, but unable to quash it entirely. While the messengers had been struggling to contain and eradicate the remnants, they were unaware that their efforts were futile. Too late, they realised that the sanguine horror swarm covering the land was only a fragment of what was occupying the planet. In the lowest fathoms of the oceans, the swarm was devouring every living thing, from fish to coral to leviathans of the deep.

Only as the swarm cleared out the furthest depths and moved closer to the surface did the messengers sense its presence. With the ubiquity of the swarm, the leeches under the oceans had been hard to sense until they moved closer. Even the diamond-ranked messengers had failed to recognise the true threat until it was too late. Once the swarm grew and reached the shallower portions of the ocean, they finally realised that attempting to stop it was futile.

It might have been possible to stop the swarm before it turned the planet into a lifeless husk, but what remained in the aftermath would not be worth keeping. Pride in their superiority over every other living thing in the cosmos had cost the messengers lives, but

they were not so blinded by it that they would fight to the death over a worthless rock. They gave up and left what remained of the planet to the horror.

Sanguine horrors did not take hosts the way world-taker worms did. Somehow, this man had claimed, as a familiar, the only thing Pei had seen the messengers surrender to. That was not the only reason that she was discovering fear for the first time. Once she started exploring the unconscious man with her magical senses, she realised the sanguine horror was only one of the bizarre things about him.

Firstly, his aura. Even dormant, while the man was unconscious, it was incredibly hard to read. The more she gleaned from it, the more she was startled. For one, he was not a dual-entity comprised of body and soul, but a gestalt physical and spiritual being. He was no messenger, but he shared that trait with them.

As their special nature was one of the cornerstones of their superiority, that fact rocked not just Pei's mind but her faith. Once again she found a blasphemous idea creeping into her mind, despite trying desperately to shut it out. The idea that perhaps she, as a messenger, was inferior to someone that wasn't.

The other things she sensed in his aura only made it worse. Scars from battles he had no business surviving. The touch of transcendent beings. Power that even she didn't recognise. More than anything else, however, what scared her was a power that she did recognise. Something no silver ranker should be able to possess. It was a power granted to the Voices of the Will, except that it was not the remote, bestowed power granted to the voices she had met. This was the other end of that power, not the recipient but the source. It belonged not to the servants of the astral kings, but to the astral kings themselves.

It shouldn't have been possible. For all that this man's aura reflected a toweringly powerful soul, he was definitely silver rank. How could there be a silver-rank astral king? But as her senses probed his astounding familiars, she grew all the more certain. The bestowed power that should belong only to the voices resided within them.

The astral kings of the messengers exclusively took other messengers as their voices. Not only had this man become an astral king at least as early as silver rank, but had claimed an apocalypse beast and a reality assassin as his voices. That was more than a little disturbing, as a voice was the mouth of an astral king to the world. What kind of astral king had, as his voices, beings who variously devoured all life and annihilated that which should have been immortal? Looking at the avatar of doom still shielding the man from her storm of feathers, she was disinclined to ask.

Pei was still contemplating these questions when the man's eyes shot open.