

## Chapter 696

### A Fight to the Pain

Outside of the barrier dome surrounding Yaresh, the command council, the strategic command for the messenger raiding force, was floating in the air. Information from the field commanders within the city was relayed to them through speaking stones, a magical device this world did not possess. Communication was one of several odd points of ignorance in this otherwise magically developed world, alongside their dearth of dimensional magic.

One of the commanders left the group to move in the direction of the Voice of the Will, Jes Fin Kaal. Although ostensibly in charge of all the messenger forces in the region – undisputedly, with the death of Mah Go Schaat – she had been leaving the direction of the raid to the gold-rankers that made up the strategic command. They were both surprised and grateful, as they knew their people and how to lead them far better than an outsider, even one sent by the astral king.

The voice had been satisfied setting objectives and then leaving the commanders to determine how best to carry them out. She only made a few stipulations, although they ranged from small to fundamental in their impact on the strategic approach to the raid. Attaching one messenger to the troop most likely to encounter one specific adventurer was a confusing but easy-to-accommodate directive. Employing the great summoning gates, on the other hand, defined the manner in which the attack was conducted.

The commander approaching Jes Fin Kaal reached her and made a status report. Kaal listened without looking at the man, her eyes locked on the city barrier, despite seeing little more than a blue blur through its surface.

“...being pushed back across the city,” the commander reported. “We had believed that the gods would largely remain out of the conflict, but not only have the churches mobilised extensive forces, but those forces have proven suspiciously strong and well-informed.”

“The goddess Knowledge,” Kaal said, her voice unconcerned. “We have long known that she was preparing for our arrival in this world. She pushed the boundaries of what information she was able to spread, but our collaboration with the church of Purity has given her leeway.”

“The command council is advising withdrawal, Voice,” the commander said. “The barrier breaches are repairing themselves quickly and the defenders are taking the upper hand as the summoning gates reach their limits. They are close to breaking down and we

cannot replace the summons being destroyed as quickly as before. The fall of Mah Go Schaat has also freed up the local diamond-rank adventurers, and we've started losing gold-rankers. Casualties are already shifting away from the summoned fodder and onto our actual forces."

"You have confirmed the aura event was Jason Asano?"

"Yes, Voice. Also..."

Kaal finally turned to look at the commander.

"What?" she demanded.

"We have been unable to determine how Mah Go Schaat died. As best we can tell, he was rushing towards Asano in the wake of the aura events. The next moment, he was dead. At Asano's feet."

The voice blinked in confusion.

"Just like that?"

"Yes, Voice. And then... Asano devoured the life force left in his corpse."

Kaal's eyebrows shot up and then, to the commander's surprise and mild terror, she burst out laughing.

"Voice, we lost a diamond-ranker."

Kaal gave him a friendly pat on the shoulder.

"And we likely won't be seeing him again for some time. Such a shame. What is Asano's current disposition?"

"One of our silver-rankers caught him in a duelling power. We have been unable to ascertain his status from that point."

"He was drawn into a dimensional space?"

"No, Voice. It was the power type that wraps each duellist in a soul shell, allowing them to fight each other, but anyone else coming into contact is forcibly thrown away."

"Then why do we not know his status?"

"Their duel moved into a breached bunker. It is likely their fight created massive casualties amongst those sheltering inside. These soul shells can hurt a silver-ranker; they'll kill the frail servant race civilians."

"The bunkers don't matter. What about Asano?"

"Forgive me, Voice, but were the bunkers not the entire objective in attacking the city? To sow terror?"

"What? Oh, yes, of course they were. What are you doing to get eyes in that bunker?"

“The commander for that district is Marek Nior Vargas. He has secured the entrance with his personal forces only, not the ones that were assigned to him. But he is denying entrance to our forces, along with the city defenders.”

Kaal’s face took on a contemplative expression.

“Interesting,” she mused. “I knew many of our gold-rankers would fight over Asano once they realised what he was, but Marek Nior Vargas being one of them is a surprise.”

“His actions could be seen as traitorous.”

“They could. But equally, he may simply be taking care in securing Asano. He’s always been a careful one, and I suspect not all of our people are acting with duty utmost in their minds. He does not act without due consideration, and he knows that only silver-rankers are allowed to kill Asano.”

“From our ongoing assessment of him, I’m not sure any of our silver-rankers *can* kill Asano.”

“Precisely.”

“Then why did you specifically direct them to try?”

“Because our people are slow to learn when it comes to respecting those who come from outside of our ranks. An unfortunate side effect of the learning programs. But now, they will respect the threat he poses and, more importantly, his potential when directed to our ends.”

“You have your own intentions for him, then.”

“I have all manner of intentions, commander, as those who whisper behind my back are all too aware. Remember that we are not in this region to wipe out a servant race city. That is why we are raiding it instead of razing it to the ground. Our objectives are greater, which is why the gold-rankers were instructed that Asano be either captured or left alive, and Marek Nior Vargas knows this.”

“But if he *is* a traitor, he might try to kill Asano, or seize him for his own ends.”

“He is a cautious man, and is unlikely to make a sudden, bold move now.”

“But if he does?”

“Then it will be an unexpected but not unacceptable outcome. Marek Nior Vargas won’t kill Asano, because that gets him nothing. And he has no information he can share with Asano that will interfere with the astral king’s agenda. He may even streamline the transition to the next phase.”

“The next phase, Voice?”

She focused on the commander again.

“The Command Council will be informed as necessary. For now, the council recommendation has my approval. Signal the full withdrawal.”

“Thank you, Voice.”

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Jason projected his will into the soul of the messenger, and the result was disorienting. His magical and aura senses showed the inside of Tera Jun Casta’s soul, while his ordinary senses still showed the inside of the bunker. He could barely comprehend what his spiritual senses perceived. It was more vast and complex than his mind could parse, with only glimpses of partial understanding.

Being inside her soul did show him enough to disprove a hypothesis he had formed while he was attacking it from the outside. He had started to suspect that the messengers were some kind of artificial race, created by the astral kings or some other beings, behind the scenes. What he discovered inside her soul disabused him of that notion. It felt messy and organic; everything was in a constant state of flux, yet it all worked in harmony. It was like hearing a hundred songs that seemed discordant, yet when played over one another, produced a heavenly chorus.

The elements of her soul ranged from completely incomprehensible to almost completely incomprehensible. The exceptions were three things that stood in stark contrast for the simple reason that Jason had a solid and immediate understanding of them. In all three cases, it was a connection to things outside of her soul that helped Jason both to find and to understand them.

The first element appeared to be the very core of the messenger's existence; a nexus hub for the body-soul gestalt that comprised her very being. Onto that central nexus, someone had placed a mark. From what he was seeing, Jason guessed that the mark was placed while the soul was still forming, like branding a newborn calf. It was placed before the soul became an impregnable whole, granting whoever placed the mark continued access.

Looking at the mark and how it was impacting the soul, it clearly did more than grant access. It had become an intrinsic part of the soul by the time it finished forming, like an internal organ. Now, if the mark was removed, the result would be a spiritual wound that would eventually be fatal.

The next aspect that stood out was what he identified as her potential. This was where her power slowly accumulated, not unlike where Jason’s essence powers grew. She was not an astral king, however, so instead of the garden inside Jason’s soul, this was a kaleidoscopic churn. That churn, however, was not growing. There was a seal

placed on it, leeching power out of her soul entirely. Once again, Jason recognised the power of an astral king at play; just glancing at showed him how he could use the same thing.

The seal drawing out power meant that Tera was eternally trapped at silver-rank, the power that would accumulate and trigger her advancement siphoned off. The astral king was taking the power that should have slowly let her grow to gold-rank and beyond, claiming for himself. Jason realised that this must be a standard practice; every messenger unable to move beyond a certain rank was not held back by some inherent limitation. They were unwitting power batteries for the astral kings they served.

Jason's mind went through what he knew about the messengers. The Voices of the Will had chosen to serve the astral kings in return for the chance to advance further than their natural limits. But now Jason realised that those limits weren't natural at all. The great gift of raising a messenger's potential was nothing more than adjusting the seal to let more power accumulate before siphoning it off.

Although startled, Jason moved his attention to the third aspect of her soul he recognised. This was easy enough because it was the mechanism that drove Tera's duelling power. As Jason was currently fending that power off with power-boosted suppression resistance. He was able to trace the power right back to the source and immediately reached out with his will to turn it off. It didn't budge, leaving him no more able to disable it than the messenger herself.

Jason turned back to the first element he'd recognised, the marked core of her being. He could feel the control that brand had over her, and realised that if he had that control, it should let him end the duelling power. It was a move that filled him with revulsion, but it was necessary. Now that he had seen the underlying mechanism of the power, he could tell that if neither of them die first, it would kill them both within minutes.

He examined the mark, seeing that it was similar to writing he had been before. There was an ancient and mysterious ideographic language that Jason had seen other examples of. His sword had the name written on the blade in those ideographs, and when he branded enemies with his Mark of Sin power, that brand also used the same language. The exact meaning of the symbol was multi-layered, but it roughly translated as 'soul-shaper.'

Hoping his own would sound at least a little less villainous, he searched his own soul for a similar mark and found it immediately, appearing the moment he willed it. He let out a sigh in his mind when he saw that it translated to 'Hegemon.' Because, of course it did.

Replacing the other astral king's brand with his own proved startlingly easy, the original shifting into the new shape with the barest expression of his will. When he did so, her entire soul shook like a shanty in a hurricane, but he ignored it and immediately turned off the now-compliant duelling power.

He was about to withdraw from her soul, then stopped himself. He looked again at the brand, now his own, on the core of her being. He knew he couldn't remove it; there had to be a brand now or it would destroy her slowly, like a spiritual gut wound that was unable to heal.

He cast his senses out, looking to see if he could find her own mark, somewhere in her soul. It was far harder than finding his own, and not only was it not his soul, but she wasn't an astral king. She didn't even have the potential to become one, with that seal in place, capping her potential.

The most he could find were dregs of what had once been the start of a mark, but both the brand – now his – and the seal were suppressing it. Jason willed his brand to stop doing so, and it did. Then he turned his attention to the seal and found that, unlike the brand, it was a simple matter to remove. He could sense her soul already trying to throw it off, and all he needed to do was give it a little help. He channelled some of his own strength into Tera and the seal pulsed like a heart before bursting.

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Vesta Carmis Zell was an astral king, comfortably residing in her astral kingdom. She was watching servant race armies battle to the death, resurrecting them and bestowing on them different abilities to keep things interesting. When she felt one of her seals disappear, she went deathly still.

It was a silver-rank seal, one of countless, but there was only one way for it to be removed: for an astral king to be allowed into a soul to remove it.

"HALLAS!" bellowed, shaking her entire realm with such power that the servant races all died. She revived them again as her servant, Hallas, arrived. Hallas was one of her more satisfactory experiments in soul engineering; a living soul bound into a golem. The golem was seven feet tall and humanoid, wrought from white and gold materials that would be coveted even in the cosmic city of Interstice.

"Hallas," she commanded. "Reach out to the others. I am calling the Council of Kings."

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With the seal gone, Jason cast his senses through Tera Jun Casta's soul once again, looking for the mark that represented Tera herself. The nascent aspects he had sensed

were already moving, coming together and refining themselves. He waited, but while the mark quickly took an initial form, it was far from complete. It did not develop to the degree Jason's or the other astral king's had because Tera was no astral king.

It wasn't enough for Jason to use. Tapping to his own power, he took some of his own presence and radiated it through her soul, doing his best to give her an understanding of an astral king's nature. He focused it on her nascent mark and she responded, her soul instinctively using him as a blueprint to further develop the mark. The moment he sensed her not just reference him but copy him outright, he cut off the power and retracted his presence. He was trying to help her, not remould her in his own image.

Her mark remained incomplete, but he was sure it was enough to work, given it was her own soul. He reached out to her brand, his will again guiding her unconscious instincts to replace his mark with hers.

Once again, her entire soul shook. Jason felt an immediate sense of rejection from her soul and he withdrew his presence from her soul entirely.

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Near-silence reigned in the dormitory bunker. The sound of a few wailing children was the only noise, and they sounded small in the vast chamber. The sound of the messenger falling to the floor was a punctuation mark to her conflict with Jason, and in its wake, everything went still.

The people there hadn't seen the bulk of the conflict between Jason and Tera, and while they had seen the end, they did not know what to make of it. From the perspective of those huddled in the bunker, Tera had burst in, followed by Jason. He'd scolded her in a voice that rang out in their souls like the command of a god, started glowing, and then, so far as anyone could tell, broke her with his mind.

Jason slowly descended from the air as the light shining from within his body dimmed. It was gone completely by the time he stopped, hovering with his feet just above the floor. He floated over to the unconscious messenger and lowered himself onto the floor in a kneel. This was partly to examine her and partly because he wasn't certain he could stand on his own two feet. The power he had just finished channelling hadn't crippled him, but it left him exhausted and hollow, like a pitted olive.

Shade manifested from Jason's shadow.

"G'day, bloke," Jason said, his voice straining to maintain its trademark casual relaxation.

"How are you, Mr Asano?"

“Between you, me and the huddled masses wondering if I’m going to kill them next? Pretty knackered.”

“Events have progressed in your absence. I recommend you take stock, Mr Asano.”

Jason fully expanded his senses for the first time since he had been caught up in her duelling power. He grunted, what was normally effortless giving him an immediate headache. His senses did not extend beyond the bunker’s protective magic, even though it had been breached at the point where he and Tera had entered. But what he sensed inside the bunker was alarming enough.

Jason pushed himself unsteadily to his feet.

“Shade, did you happen to retrieve my sword with one of your bodies?”

“Of course, Mr Asano.” Shade produced Jason’s sword from his dimensional space and Jason took it. Immediately, his arm dropped, the sword tip scraping the hard tile floor as his arm dangled.

Jason and Shade both turned to the still-open doors. Moments later, a gold-rank messenger floated through, a silver-rank adventurer dangling from each hand. They were the pair Jason had encountered on entering the bunker. His senses told him that they were unconscious, not dead.

Jason recognised the commander of the messenger forces in the entertainment district. Like Tera, this man dressed more like an adventurer than a typical messenger, eschewing the impractical drapery for plain, practical armour. He was very brown, from his light skin to his dark hair, to the grey-tipped brown feathers of his wings.

His aura was intimidating. Like his appearance, it was imposing but not flashy. Jason didn’t try to move as the messenger floated over to him at a walking pace, more messengers filing through the doors behind him. He was flanked by two more gold-rankers, with silvers forming up in a tactical wedge. All that power was directed at one very tired Jason and his shadow familiar.

“My name is Marek Nior Vargas,” the commander told him. “Put your sword away, Jason Asano; you barely have the strength to stay on your feet, let alone lift it. You couldn’t fight one of my silvers, let alone all of us.”

Jason slowly lifted a hand to push the hood of his cloak back, revealing his face.

“Then again,” Jason told the commander, “perhaps I do have the strength to stand.”

He floated into the air to match Marek and lifted his sword, holding it level and steady, pointed at the messenger as he made a steely-voiced demand.

“Drop. Your. Sword.”

“I... don’t have a sword,” the unarmed Marek told him.