

Chapter 646

The Genuine Article

Benella was anxious as she rode a skimmer bike carefully through the rainforest. There were no roads to her destination and she wouldn't risk being observed flying out over the canopy, so she took a small bike and made her cautious way along the animal trails. Fortunately, there were enough large magical beasts amongst the local fauna that the trails were generously wide, if quite meandering. Early morning light only partially broke through the canopy, drenching everything in a beautiful twilight she was unable to appreciate, her mind occupied by what was coming next.

She reached her destination, a small clearing with a creek babbled past a rocky outcropping. She parked the bike in the shadow of the rock and leaned up against it herself. As she waited, she nervously checked her watch over and over, wondering how time seemed to tick over so slowly.

Finally, there was a shimmer in the air and a glorious being became visible. Descending slowly, he looked like a celestine with alabaster skin and long hair of spun gold. It spilled down the back of his shirtless, hairless torso and gleamed under the sun. His eyes were solid gold orbs. He was too tall to be a celestine, however, standing some eight feet high, as well as having a pair of wings spread out behind him. His legs were covered in loose teal pants with gold trim.

He descended, stopping to float in place just before his bare feet reached the ground.

His wings were pristine white, aside from yellow and orange feathers along the bottom.

They were clearly not responsible for his flight, at least not through physically holding him aloft. As he floated magically in the air, the were open behind him, gently undulating.

When he spoke, his voice was deep and resonant to the point of having an almost unnatural reverberation to it.

"I sense your fear, elf. Why are you here alone?"

"Hareh refused to come."

"What failure makes him unwilling to face me?"

"There is a man in the city. I suspect that he noticed the mask placed over my aura."

"A gold ranker?"

"Only silver."

"That should not be possible."

“I was uncertain. But there are other indicators that the man is unusual. Certainly more than what he claims. He is attached to a group of adventurers, and not inconsequential ones, I discovered by making some discreet inquiries. But Haresh insisted on eliminating the threat, and he is the one you gave final authority.”

“ARE YOU QUESTIONING MY JUDGEMENT?”

The messenger’s voice went off like a bomb, shaking the trees and plants around the clearing and causing loose stones to tumble down the outcropping. Benella stumbled back, putting a foot into the creek and tripping, landing on her back. She was disoriented for a moment and when she looked up, the messenger was floating over like the blade of a guillotine.

“I would never, Lord Fal. I only sought to clarify, believing that my explanation was flawed. I acknowledge my failing.”

Fal scowled, floating back

“Tell me of what happened.”

“Haresh insisted that we eliminate the threat, but this man proved hard to find. He is resistant to tracking magic and seems to have some means of teleportation. We only got lucky and found him at all because he was practising an aura technique of some kind in a public park at night. His aura was almost completely different from the mask I had seen when I first encountered him.”

“Then how did you know it was him?”

“The aura mask you gave me. It reacted to his aura the same way both times.”

“Reacted how?”

Still sprawled, half in the creek and too scared to move, Benella winced looking away.

“Tell me!” Fal demanded, his voice reverberating like a command from the heavens, projected into the clearing through some magical channel.

“A different way to the other servant races,” she said, dragging the words out of herself. Her head was still turned from Fal, her eyes clenched shut like a child anticipating a beating.

“I did not ask what it was *not* like, servant. I asked what...”

He paused, his eyes narrowing as they focused not on Benella but her shadow. He moved in a flash, reaching into her shadow and pulling something out.

“Reaper spawn,” he said as Shade dangled from a massive fist and Benella scrambled out of the way. “Who do you serve, familiar?”

“You will learn soon enough,” Shade said calmly. “He has business with your kind.”

“He’s watching, isn’t he?”

“Yes.”

Fal then did something that neither Shade nor Jason realised was possible, launching a soul attack on Jason through his connection to Shade. Then it was Fal’s turn to be surprised as Jason not just easily fended it off but retaliated, pushing the messenger’s aura away from Shade.

The messenger tossed Shade aside.

“You should stay out of our affairs, shadow. The Reaper does not govern my kind; we do not grow old and die like the lesser races.”

“You may not age, but you do die,” Shade told him. “You claim to be the superior beings, yet you all seem to meet someone stronger eventually, and find your way to my progenitor.”

“The Builder was of my kind, shadow. You think he will die too?”

“Have you ever wondered why he has been so obsessed with building his own world? What has been done once can be done again, or undone entirely, and he is not the only one creating a universe. The Builder has enemies, and one of them is right here. Do you believe that the likes of you can face someone like that? I suggest you run from this place, lest your time to meet my progenitor comes soon.”

Fal moved in a blur and was once again clutching Shade, this time squeezing hard. Shade retaliated by draining mana and the alabaster skin of the highly magical messenger started growing dull, starting with the hand and slowly crawling over the wrist and up the forearm.

“I am of the greatest people in the cosmos,” Fal snarled. “We are without equal, let alone superiors. Your words are simply the bluster of the helpless.”

Power surged down Fal’s arm, and while the blackening was accelerated, Shade’s body was destroyed.

Jason was sitting in an office in the Yaresh Adventure Society branch, high in a tower of dark, glossy metal. With him was Humphrey, Estella and a high-level adventure society official named Fiora Luth. Like Jason and Humphrey, she was silver rank, although entirely through cores.

Fiora was a lifelong administrator, rarely seeing combat outside of a monster surge, and even then, it was usually indirect. She had been a logistics officer during the latest surge, whose risks weren’t confronting monsters but getting supplies through monster-infested areas. While waiting for Benella to arrive at her destination, she and Jason had shared their experiences of supply-running during the surge.

Once Jason saw the messenger through Shade's perception, they fell silent after Jason confirmed to them that a messenger was present. He had seen false messengers before, created by a transformation zone or summoning ability. He had to admit that they paled in comparison to the genuine article, even just a silver-rank one. Although it was the lowest rank at which adult messengers were to be found, it still made quite the impression.

As soon as Jason confirmed there was a messenger, Fiora sent a signal and adventurer teams started moving on the network of associates Estella had managed to dig out since first investigating Benella at Jason's instigation. It had barely been a day and a half since then, but Estella had been quick to map out her key associates. The fact that Benella had called them together right after she parted from Jason and Zolit had been a help.

Jason opened his eyes after his link to Shade's body was cut off by its self-destruction.

"It's over?" Humphrey asked.

"He found Shade," Jason said. "We expected as much. It was a gamble sending him in Benella's shadow."

"It was the right move," Fiora set. "The messengers now know that we know they have agents in the city, but they'll have to be more circumspect. Hopefully, we can root them out while they're laying low, by following the trail from this Benella woman."

"It was quick thinking to have the Shade body in your shadow jump to Benella when you saw she was leaving the city," Humphrey told Estella.

"I wasn't sure if it was the right move," she said.

"I agreed with it," Jason said.

"As did I," Shade agreed from Jason's shadow. "Consulting Mr Miller was the correct instinct."

"And in the days you've spent in large social gatherings," Fiora said to Jason, "you haven't seen anyone else that you suspect?"

"No," Jason said, "but I could easily have missed someone. The aura mask she was wearing was incredibly good. It took multiple direct interactions before I even noticed it, and even then I wasn't certain. The most worrying part, though, is that it wasn't even her aura mask. I always suspected that the messengers would outclass us when it came to auras, but not to this degree. Whether it's an item or a technique, their aura-related magic beats us out handily."

"Why would you suspect that they had superior auras?" Fiora asked.

“Because of their nature,” Jason said. “Most entities are living beings with souls inside. For messengers, their bodies and souls are one thing, not two. Since auras are projections of the soul, their gestalt nature gives them access to abilities those with body-soul duality do not have.”

“Are there any vulnerabilities to this nature?” Fiora asked.

“Only if you can convince them to be self-destructive,” Jason said.

“Surely we should explore this more,” she said.

“My understanding is that the topic is already being studied,” Jason said. “There is a gold rank healer in our convoy, Carlos Quilido. He knows more on that topic than I.”

Humphrey was watching Jason warily. Jason’s reaction to Carlos asking Jason to be a test subject for how to harm body-soul gestalts had ended violently. No sign of disturbance appeared in Jason’s expression, body language or aura, but Humphrey kept a close eye on him.

Jason not only noticed Humphrey doing so, but also saw Fiora notice the dynamic. She didn’t ask, despite the curiosity Jason felt from her. Jason sensed Fiora’s self-control as she pushed her curiosity aside to refocus her attention.

“I’ll admit I was sceptical when the director suggested you might be able to dig out some of the agents working for the messengers in the city,” she said.

“I was lucky,” Jason said. “She made a mistake and drew my attention. The odds of finding another by just randomly going to places with lots of people are slim at best. Chasing down the people associating with Benella will result in much better leads.”

“What was her objective?” Humphrey wondered. “Working as assistant to some mid-tier fight promoter doesn’t seem to have much in the way of benefits for the messengers.”

“I imagine that many of their agents are low-level people placed in roles where more powerful people are around them,” Fiora said. “Assistants, housekeepers, low-level bureaucrats. The ones that powerful people pay no more attention to than a lamp or a chair.”

“It could be the person she’s an aid to,” Jason said. “He seems innocuous, but he’s an outworlder. That’s not something to ignore when dealing with a big dimensional mess. A bunch of messengers turning up, for example.”

“I did know there was an outworlder in the city,” Fiora said. “The society keeps track of people like that. I’ve glanced through the report logs on him, but the only thing that stuck out was that, for an outworlder, he’s been unusually sedate. Some minor criminal activity that we let go. We’d rather he stick to that than look for something more exciting. My

investigators are looking closer now, of course, and I have analysts combing these reports for any less-obvious indicators that he's been up to something."

Fiora leaned back in her chair.

"We've been lucky that the messengers are fighting on multiple fronts," she said.

"You're aware of the natural array?"

"We are," Humphrey said. "Our magical researcher is downright eager to see it. He's been a little cranky since his intended lecture about it to my team and the other group with us was derailed."

"We're currently invested in keeping the fighting centred on the messenger strongholds and away from the city. We won't be pushing into the array zone any time soon. Our success on that front means the people here, behind the walls, don't understand how bad the fighting is. If the messengers can cut off the supply lines coming out of the city, though, our forces will have to pull back. Then the fighting will be at our walls."

Jason felt her lockdown her emotions and she stood up. Humphrey and Jason did the same and she shook both of their hands.

"I will confess that you have left me quite curious, Mr Miller. The director said that if I looked deeper into your identity I would find it, so she asked me not to. I wouldn't ordinarily let that stop me, but you've done us a service, so I'll respect that."

"I appreciate it," Jason said. "But it's the Adventure Society, Mrs Luth. Service is the point."