

Chapter 669

Hot Chocolate

Jes Fin Kaal was not prone to nervousness. As a messenger, confidence was ingrained. More than that, she was a Voice of the Will; a representative of her people's most powerful beings. But as much as she might have tried to bury the memory, she remembered the sense of inferiority that had defined the final moments of Pei Vas Kartha as she died at Jason Asano's hands.

While being a Voice of the Will was an unquestionably powerful position, there was no escaping the fact that it was a state of permanent subordination. Even if that was to an astral king, serving anyone did not come naturally to messengers. While ordinary messengers might obey her now, each one of them was looking towards the day when they surpassed her, reaching the pinnacle of their kind. That only a minuscule few would ever reach those heights meant little, so long as the potential was still there. For all the power that a Voice commanded, they did not have that potential. Their power ultimately came from another.

The messengers had never been able to determine what set the limits to their individual power. They did not even learn those limits until they hit them. For those who discovered themselves unable to surpass silver rank, there were only two options. One was to accept their status as the least of their kind, and live with being superior to everything that wasn't a messenger. The other was to seek out an astral king that would have them, allowing them to artificially surpass their limits.

While other messengers might serve an astral king, and be subject to their power, they could always escape it if they themselves grew powerful enough. For a Voice of the Will, there was no going back. Silver and even gold-ranked messengers might show deference to a Voice of the Will, those who reached diamond looked at them with disdain. Diamond was the hard limit for voices, while messengers who reached that point on their own had the potential to become astral kings, however unlikely that was. For that reason, diamond rank messengers looked down even on voices that had reached the same rank.

Jes Fin Kaal was a gold-rank voice, and while she had claimed command of the messenger forces in the region, there was a diamond ranker amongst them who could take that right from her whenever he liked. That he had chosen not to was typical of diamond-rank messengers. While they might be forced to capitulate to the agendas of astral kings, their obsession was transcending mortality to become one themselves.

Unsurprisingly, the diamond ranker, Mah Go Schaat had claimed the largest and tallest building in the stronghold as his own. Jes flew up and hovered around the domed pinnacle. She waited to be acknowledged, one minute turning into ten and minutes becoming an hour. Everyone in the stronghold could look up and see her being left outside, waiting on an audience.

Jes did not mind, seeing it both as a childish power play and a chance to rest her mind in meditation. Between the attacks on the messenger strongholds, organising the upcoming attack and reacting to the adventurers hitting the worm nests, she could use the rest. As for the idea of being shamed in front of the entire stronghold, she did not care what the people below or the one she was waiting on thought of her. She neither needed their praise nor feared their scorn.

Finally, a panel in the dome slid open to allow her entry. Inside was a library with bookshelves and tables covered in tomes. Freestanding magical writing boards were scrawled with notes and had papers pinned to them, showing scraps of map or magical diagrams.

There was only one chair. It was a massive throne of dark leather in the messenger style, with an hourglass back to allow for wings. Mah Go Schaat was sitting in it, his brown wings with dark yellow speckling spread out behind it. He was a massive figure, even for a messenger, being almost as tall sitting as Jes was when floating upright, just over the floor.

The chair was facing the door, but he did not look up as Jes entered. His gaze was locked onto a many-faceted crystal he was holding in one hand. She waited patiently, just as she had outside. Finally, Mah's eyes shifted from the crystal to her.

"Why do you interrupt my contemplation, Voice?"

"The time approaches to attack the city. We launch our attack in the hours before dawn."

"You would presume to have me move at your word?"

"I am only the voice. The word is that of the astral king."

"Is it? This is your plan, Jes Fin Kaal."

"If you wish to claim my position, you have the power. I can let the astral king know that you will be enacting his agenda."

Mah glowered and Jes did not let her disdain reach her face. Mah was a typical, unthinking thug who believed that being a messenger and being powerful was all he needed to embody their superior ideals. Jes knew that superiority was not just a birthright, and that their actions were needed to maintain it.

Jes knew that it was foolish to prod Mah, yet she could not resist the urge. The more powerful a messenger became, especially one like him, the more they chafed any time they were forced to acknowledge any will but their own. Being a voice, and no longer the instrument of her own will, had given Jes what she believed was a more objective perspective. The myopic power obsession of too many messengers left them with no sense of what truly made their kind great. They had faith just as blind as the fools who worshipped gods.

Mah not only lacked the inclination to administer the messenger strongholds but also the ability, and he knew it. Like Fal Vin Garath, whom Jes would be sending to test Asano, Mah was a brute who saw value in nothing but power. It was only on realising that martial power alone would not allow them to transcend immortality that they started looking further afield. Jes had seen more than one diamond ranker suddenly immerse themselves in study after hitting the barrier that lay between diamond rank and transcendence.

“Very well,” Mah finally said through gritted teeth.

“If I may,” Jes said with deference, knowing when to step back, “I would like to submit a role in the attack for your approval.”

“Speak on it,” Mah ordered.

“The weapon we placed in the city years ago is no longer under containment,” Jes said. “I was going to place someone new to contain the change, but as the timing was right, I decided to exacerbate it instead. Once the weapon awakens, the city will deploy their forces against it, as it is already inside the defences. That is when we will attack weak points in the city infrastructure that we have identified. My hope is that you, as the supreme power in this conflict, will consent to attack a critical node in the infrastructure while the city is occupied with the weapon. From there, if you occupy the city’s sole diamond-rank defender, our forces can rampage.”

“What is your goal?”

“The city has been the feeding point for the forces that have been harassing us. We seek to ruin and sow chaos; to bring the war they have pressed on us to their doorstep. They coddle their weak masses, who will demand their power be used as a shield they can huddle behind, no longer sent to the attack. We can then turn our attention to the Builder's remnant forces, the Ashen and the tainted.”

“Then what solution have you found to the natural array? Have you finally accepted it for the crucible it is?”

“I still oppose a mass attack. There is no telling how many more of our people will suffer the taint.”

“Which is how we cull the weak and inferior. The ones who fall to the taint – as you doubtless would, without the astral king’s power – are not worthy to be counted as messengers.”

“We will let the essence users eliminate the array.”

“How will you manage that?”

“What does it matter, so long as it works?”

Mah’s lip curled in a snarl but he didn’t push.

“Go, then. Send word when the time comes and I may deign to join your attack.”

Jes gave him a short bow.

“My gratitude for your benevolence, Mah Go Schaat.”

The rear wing of the cloud hospital Jason created was the private residence and provided facilities for Jason and his team, still fully within his spirit domain. Jason waited, leaning against a wall with two fruit drinks in large steins, one of which he was sipping from through a metal straw. On the opposite wall, a doorway opened as the cloud door dissolved into nothing, revealing an exhausted-looking Taika.

The big man was stripped down to the waist, his dark, tattooed torso almost large enough to seal the doorway again. Gone was the roundness that he had when they first met, his body instead sporting the sculpted muscle of a professional wrestler.

Jason held out the spare drink, Taika taking it eagerly.

“Thanks, bro,” Taika said as he plucked the straw from his stein, then heavily gulped down half of the drink at a go, juice running down his chin. He let out a breath as he grinned and wiped his chin with the back of his arm. “That’s the stuff.”

“For a guy who’s been meditating,” Jason said, “you look a lot like someone who just finished a session at the gym.”

“Meditation isn’t exactly the same for an essence user as for a lady who buys a lot of crystals at a new age store,” Taika said. “You know that. I’ve seen you doing that Dance of the Sword Fairy technique that Rufus taught you.”

“Yeah,” Jason agreed. The availability of more effective meditation techniques for adventurers was one of the fundamental differences between the essence users of Earth and Pallimustus. As one of the pillars of non-core advancement, such techniques were also the least intuitive to develop. Pallimustus had been refining them for millennia, whereas Earth had almost nothing

Even the US Network only had a few basic techniques, but that had still put them in a globe-dominating position amongst the magical factions. Those techniques had come

from the Network founder when his familiar – who would go on to become Mr North – betrayed him.

As essence users ranked up, their minds changed, becoming capable of more. Meditation techniques need to change accordingly, taking in elements of internal mana manipulation, martial arts katas and plain physical exertion, depending on the nature and purpose of the exercise. Jason relied heavily on different versions of the sword dance meditation Taika had just mentioned.

“Did Humphrey show you something new?” Jason asked. As Humphrey and Taika had similar roles, Humphrey had supplied Taika with more appropriate techniques than Jason or Farrah had to offer him back on Earth. Without anything specialised for him, he had been using the same general techniques Farrah taught all her Network trainees.

“Actually,” Taika said, “I met this bloke when I was coming back into the city from a solo job.”

While Jason had been doing sexy aura training over the past week, Taika had been taking solo contracts, pushing himself to finally cross the line into silver. As a result, his aura was almost trembling with how ready he was to take the final step.

“We got to talking,” Taika continued, “and he ended up showing me this meditation technique that meshes perfectly with my garuda essence. It’s called Golden Wings Transcending the Heavens. Sounds pretty sweet, right?”

“It does. And it looks like it works pretty sweet too, if your aura is anything to go by.”

“Hell yeah, bro. You ready to have me on the team?”

“That, I’m not so sure about,” Jason said.

Taika frowned.

“Are you saying I’m not good enough?”

“No, I’m saying that between you and Rufus joining, there’s too many sexy brown people. I’m worried Belinda will have the team name changed to Hot Chocolate.”

The messenger forces were preparing to leave their strongholds. The attacks from the city had been an impediment, but not a critical one, and the messengers were aching to pay what they thought of as the servant races back in kind.

Not far from one of the marshalling yards, Jes looked at Fal Vin Garath, who still didn’t have a mouth after she had taken it from him. She was somewhat surprised that he had managed to endure, not thinking the brute would tolerate what she had done to him for long. Her ability to affect him in such a way was tied directly to Fal’s acceptance of the authority of the astral king she served. The moment he rejected that authority, his mouth

would have returned. She would have subsequently killed him, but he'd have died with his mouth back.

It was a test in and of itself, as even a moment's disloyalty would have been enough. Yet he stayed true, despite the inherent ambition and demonstrated arrogance of the man. Despite Fal being her least favourite kind of person, Jes was forced to acknowledge at least a modicum of grudging respect.

"We are going to attack the city," she told him. "You've already been given your task. Hunt down Asano and kill him. If you can, all well and good. If not, do your best to withdraw and regroup with our regular forces. Do you understand?"

Fal's blank lower face morphed back into a mouth, yet he silently nodded.

"Good," she told him. "Now that you have a mouth again, do you have any questions?"

"If this man truly is somehow a silver rank astral king, are you certain you want me to kill him?"

"If he is someone that you can kill, Fal Vin Garath, he isn't worth using."

She felt the anger suffuse his aura.

"You don't like it," she said. "You don't like that this man is already on the path that is the goal of every messenger. You don't like that I'm using you as a tool, as if he is more important than you. I am curious if you will let that anger rule you. If you do, you will die. It might be because you fight Asano to the death, or perhaps you will lash out at me and be struck down."

She grinned.

"Prove me wrong," she told him. "Show me that you're more than a mindless thug, and you will find that I can be a valuable ally in your quest for advancement. We did not start off on the best foot, Fal Vin Garath, but do well here and this could go very well for you."

