

## Chapter 687

### King of the Sky

Fal Vin Garath sneered and headed in the direction of the pyramid. Although no one saw it, the sneer was for his commander, for his astral king's Voice of the Will and for Asano, who would soon be dead. Fal's wings spread out as he wove his way through the battlefield, the image of grace and elegance as he glided through the chaos. He seemed untouchable, yet there was no frenetic dodging as he moved through the monsters, attacks from the vehicles below passing him by. He danced through the sky. One moment he was swooping down or shifting his angle as he descended in a graceful curve. At other times, he tucked in his wings and plunged downwards, spinning in an inverted pirouette as energy beams and explosions went off around him as if avoiding his path.

Fal was big, even for a messenger, but he was no thug; his large size belied his swift and graceful powers. Any fool could blind-fire a storm of razor-sharp feathers and be effective. It took one truly superior, even amongst messengers, to take simple agility enhancements and spatial awareness enhancements and become truly effective on the battlefield.

Fal's fighting style was a reflection of his flight: open, graceful and mobile. If he was forced to fight Asano inside a building sized for humans, his own body would be an enemy as he was boxed into small rooms and tight hallways. While there was glory to be found in fighting on the enemy's terms and winning anyway, Fal knew that Asano was not a foe on which to build extra accolades. Jes Fin Kaal knew what Fal could do, and at least some of what Asano could do. Even if she was underestimating Fal, her confidence that Asano would beat him meant that the outworlder was not to be taken lightly.

As he drew closer to the pyramid, the beams from Asano's building increasingly focused on him. They prioritised messenger targets, so most of the others were giving it a wide berth, letting the monsters take the hits. Despite the increased attention from the beams, Fal eluded them easily.

He did not yell out his challenge to Asano. Any animal could bellow. Fal had a point to make; that messengers were different. Not just stronger but inherently better. When Fal called out to Asano, he did so in a way that the servant races could not replicate. Projecting his aura, he laced it with physical force, the signature trait of messenger auras. He created vibrations in the air that manifested as words, rumbling loudly across the battlefield. The result was Fal forging words as thunder, crashing down imposingly on the defenders hidden in their fortresses.

“JASON ASANO. COME OUT AND FACE ME!”

The beams stopped targeting Fal, instead going for other messengers that were more distant. This allowed Fal to hover in place, his eyes glaring challenge.

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In the entertainment district, Jason was chatting with Rufus as they watched Gordon draw out a massive magical orrery.

“Placed in an extreme circumstance, with power levels far above your own,” Rufus told him, “you do something spectacularly outlandish that you probably shouldn’t.”

“There you go then,” Jason said. “You just said I shouldn’t do it.”

“Are you going to do it?”

“Of course I’m going to... sorry, give me a sec. I’ve got a thing.”

Jason looked off into the middle distance.

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On each side of the pyramid, a hex panel opened and a metal object slid out. They were simple metal arms with a small pyramid made of clear crystal seated on the end. The four pyramids started glowing with soft light and a massive image appeared in the sky, over the giant eye. It was a cloaked figure that looked to be standing on the eye, although its translucency demonstrated that it was only a projection. The cloak’s hood was pushed back from the figure’s head, revealing Asano’s face. His eyes, reflections of the image orb his image was standing atop, glared up at Fal Vin Garath, who was floating some distance from the pyramid.

A voice spoke, but it did not come from the image of Jason. The same technique that Fal had used was replicated, but on a much larger scale. The aura coming from the pyramid covered the entire city district, strong enough that the gold-rankers had not managed to suppress it.

The entire battlefield shuddered with physical force as Jason crafted his words, the walls of the sturdy fortress vehicles shaking. The air itself trembled, the summoned monsters panicking as messengers halted in the air, unnerved. They could feel something in the aura, something that resonated inside them and told them to obey. They shook it off immediately, but it left them unsettled.

When the words came, they did not come from any one place. They were not spoken at all. They just came into being, like an act of creation.

**IF YOU WANT TO FIGHT ME, THEN COME IN HERE AND GET ME.**

The words were inescapable, yet they went precisely as far as the aura and no further. They covered the battlefield, yet instead of thundering across the city, the sound stopped dead beyond the area Jason chose.

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Fal felt hesitation for the first time. He knew that it was an intimidation tactic, having just used it himself, but the comparison was humbling. Messengers did not handle being humble very well. Fal knew that only by using the pyramid to somehow amplify his aura had he accomplished the display, but it didn't matter. Once enough people were involved, image became truth, which was why Fal had made such a public challenge in the first place.

To the defenders, Asano's words had been a rallying cry. To the summoned monsters it was confusion, the voice of a master scolding them in anger. The summoners quickly reasserted control, but there was no denying the influence Asano had. This was even true of the messengers. The entire reason Fal had been sent after him was the idea that he was somehow an astral king.

Fal realised that, on some level, he had been denying what Asano was. He'd been told, but the very idea was absurd. But now he had felt the truth shuddering through his body, and there was no part of him that could deny it anymore. And he knew that every messenger on the battlefield was experiencing the same thing.

As the giant projection of Asano vanished. Fal considered ways to undercut him. He was tempted to mock him, to try and lure him out where they could fight on Fal's terms, but he knew that it wouldn't work. After Asano's display, shouting mockery at the pyramid would be like a drunkard shouting at a temple, a worthless buffoon.

Even the slender chance of it working was gone once a contingent of gold-rankers moved to join Fal. There was no way he would come out to face that. Fal had no doubt that the sudden show of support was designed exactly to make sure that Asano did not emerge. The Voice of the Will had plans for Asano, and Fal was the sacrificial lamb that would prove his worth to the other messengers.

Asano proving himself against a messenger was a pointless exercise in showmanship. Many messengers had died to adventurers; it was happening at that very moment, all around the city. Any fool would see through it, but that was politics. So long as she could sell the pretence, Jes Fin Kaal got what she wanted. Which now meant Fal had to enter the pyramid and fight Asano under the worst possible conditions.

"Well?" the commander asked. "Aren't you going in? We all heard that impressive invitation."

The commander's voice was steady but Fal knew he would be roiling inside. Fal knew how galling it was that an astral king at his own rank existed. Astral kings were the peak that every messenger strove to ascend, yet here was someone who had reached it, without being a messenger, and at *lower-rank*.

Fal turned around to speak to face the commander, unable to resist delivering a jab.

"I didn't hear my name," he said. "He didn't sound like he was any more worried about you than me. Or did Asano's display leave the mighty commander of all these gold-rankers scared?"

"You would be wise to watch your words, Fal Vin Garath?"

"Or what? You'll have the Voice of the Will send me on a suicide mission? You're just a servant. You might as well be one of the lesser races, huddling in their vehicles."

The commander smiled instead of retorting, which unnerved Fal in the fleeting instant before he realised why. The reflexes of a gold-ranker could have deflected the harpoon shot from the pyramid before it impaled Fal, but he hadn't even warned him, let alone moved.

The harpoon yanked back with blinding speed, dragging Fal with it. The chain to which it was attached led into the cloud stuff of the pyramid where a hex panel was absent. In the moment it took for the harpoon to pull back inside, Fal struggled pointlessly against the huge barbs holding the harpoon in place. He could have gotten free with a few extra moments, but he didn't have them. He disappeared into the pyramid and the hex panel slid back out to cover the place he had entered.

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Fal fell through a misty wall that immediately turned solid behind him. The harpoon had vanished somewhere during his passage through cloud-substance that made up the building, itself turning ephemeral.

Impaling was a negligible wound to a messenger, the damage already healing by the time Fal floated off the floor and into a more dignified position. The floor was already slick with his silver-gold blood, shining like metal with a faint blue sheen. It likewise stained his clothes, loose and white with gold embellishments that set off his gold hair.

Fal pressed his hand onto the wall he had just passed through, finding it now cool and solid to the touch. It was some manner of smooth-cut stone or crystal, or perhaps some substance in between. He took in his surroundings, a hallway that would have been generously sized for humans. To Fal it was cramped, his impressive height almost brushing the ceiling and his wings unable to unfurl at all.

He looked each way down the corridor, seeing one that lead to a turn and another that was a dead end. He wondered at the odd design choice, thinking about how it would be the worst place for him to fight. That immediately triggered a realisation that came too late as something struck him from behind like a meteor. He was smashed into the wall at the dead end of the hallway, spiderweb cracks appearing in the stone from the impact. That was a hard hit, even for a silver-ranker, and Fal slumped to the ground again. He rallied instantly, looking up to see what had hit him.

It looked like a human, only bigger. The dark-skinned man was not as tall as Fal himself, but Fal was towering even by the standards of his own kind. This man may have been a full foot shorter, but with his sculpted muscle and majestic size, a pair of wings would have let him pass for a messenger himself.

Fal again rose up, not pushing himself to his feet like an animal but floating with his aura. It was hard, as the aura permeating the building was hostile and oppressive. It wasn't enough to entirely suppress him, but it made using his aura a struggle. Even so, he used it to stand to his full height, feet floating just off the floor. He looked down at the man who was in no apparent rush to continue his attack.

The man's body might not have matched Fal for height, but he was just as wide, if not wider, with shoulders that were geographical in magnitude. He was wearing loose pants but neither shirt nor shoes, although he did have a towel draped over his shoulders. Intricate tattoos marked his chocolate skin, and while Fal didn't recognise the Māori designs, he correctly guessed that they were tribal in origin. The man's short-cropped hair was wet. He had the blank scent of someone who had just used crystal wash, although his natural scent was beginning to assert itself. It was the springtime freshness that marked an outworlder, and a glance at the man's aura confirmed it.

As Fal examined him, he examined Fal in turn. Although Fal doubted that the huge man had to look up at people very often, he showed no concern in doing so with Fal. His expression said that he didn't see anything interesting and his gaze turned to his own body. He frowned with displeasure at Fal's blood from the impaling wound, which had gotten onto his arm and chest during their impact.

"Bro, I just showered," the man complained.

Fal knew that if the man was willing to converse, he may well lead him to Asano.

"You took a shower in the middle of a battle?" Fal asked.

"I was covered in rank-up goo. Have you smelled that stuff? It's chemical warfare, bro."

"You just ranked up to silver?"

Fal's aura senses were massively suppressed in this building, barely able to glean the most basic information about the man. He pushed a little harder and saw the tell-tale signs of a very recent rank gain. For all the man looked unperturbed, his body must have been aching for rest.

"Who are you? Where is Jason Asano?"

"I'm Taika Williams, and Jason's not in. That giant battle you just mentioned, remember? If you're looking for him, just wait. He'll do something pretty attention-grabbing sooner or later. It's kind of his thing."

"You're lying."

"No, it really is his thing. And I'm not even counting that big projection he just did. How he managed that from across the city I have no idea."

"I mean that you're lying about him not being here. There's no way he can project his aura at a remove. Not unless this pyramid is a lot more than a cloud building."

Even as he said it, Fal realised that it almost certainly was. There was an oppressive power, a sense of dominion that he normally associated with ground sanctified to a deity.

"I'm telling you the truth," Taika said. "You're pretty rude, bird man."

"I am not a bird man," Fal said, forcefully enunciating each word. For all his conflict with his own kind, Fal was still a messenger, with a messenger's pride.

"I am one of the supreme beings of every reality blessed enough to be graced with our presence."

"You've got giant bird wings, bro. Not a criticism; I'm just saying that you need to accept yourself in order to love yourself."

"These wings are the symbol of my glory as a messenger."

"They're bird wings, bro. Just big and on a man, so... bird man."

Fal conjured a curved sword and swung it at Taika's neck. Taika held up an arm to block it and the sword bounced off. The skin was unblemished, although the area around the strike point had turned jade-green. It swiftly faded back to Taika's normal chocolate colour. Taika didn't retaliate.

Fal frowned.

"Is that the Emerald Skin power?" he asked.

"You know your essence abilities, bro. Not your weapons, though. That curved blade is for slicing but you went for the chop. Can you conjure a machete? It might work better for you; I'll wait."

Fal ignored Taika's words, instead focusing on his aura. He pushed it out to wash over the other man, through the interference of the building around them. His aura flinched

back as soon as he tried to suppress Taika at all, his instincts screaming at him to kneel before the king of the sky.

As he had feared, this man had the powers of a garuda.