

Chapter 702

War Guilt Clause

Marek Nior Vargas stood before the portal leading out of Asano's astral kingdom. In the weeks since he first entered, his life and future had been entirely transformed, but he found himself nervous as he looked at the way out. The world outside held immense potential, now. It held a hope that he had never felt before, but with hope came the chance for that hope to be crushed. Given Marek's ambitions, being crushed was the more likely outcome.

"This isn't me letting you run loose," Asano reiterated. "I just want you, me and a man I know to have a talk about auras."

The Jason Asano standing next to Marek was one of countless copies, lesser avatars running around Asano's astral kingdom. He would not have a prime avatar until he was complete as an astral king. Even so, he had no trouble holding a conversation with Marek while his true body was talking with whoever was on the other side of the portal.

"I know," Marek said. "I won't run."

Not only did Asano still have all of Marek's people but there was no telling who or what was waiting through the portal. For all Marek knew, Asano could be handing him over to the Adventure Society or an unscrupulous researcher eager to dissect a powerful messenger.

He didn't believe that to be the case. Marek had been living inside Asano's soul for weeks which had given him an unusually intimate perspective on the man, although that in itself could be deceiving. Time and again Marek had seen people work against their own interests and core beliefs, for reasons that he could scarcely comprehend.

He had spoken at length with Asano, largely about the messengers. Marek had a sense that Asano was looking for reasons not to kill them, and perhaps even let them go. It made little sense to Marek as messengers did not show mercy. He couldn't help but wonder if that was an aspect of his indoctrination that he had yet to dig out and examine. Perhaps his incarceration in Asano's astral kingdom was a chance to do that. It was something to discuss with Payan, who was as close as he had to a brother.

"There's a slight delay," Asano said. "I'm talking with a high priestess. I don't think bringing you out while she's there will be a good move."

"I'm not sure bringing me out while anyone is there is a wise choice."

"Yes, but the man I want you to meet is not foolish enough to come in and meet you here."

“He doesn’t trust you?”

“Not that much. You came in here and opened up your soul, but would you have done that just to save your life?”

“No. I wanted an astral king that was not like the others. If I had known you would free us, I would have rushed in.”

“Tera would not,” Jason said. “Have you made any headway with her?”

“There is nothing you do not see and hear in this place,” Marek pointed out. “You have been privy to our every interaction.”

“I know what you and she have said, yes, but not how you think. Ascribing my sensibilities to messenger mentality will only lead me to false assumptions.”

“She is still fragile. You gave her and I the same thing, but the results are very different. For me, it is a chance at a future for my entire people. From her, you have taken everything. Who she is, what she is. Her identity as a messenger. You’ve poisoned her to other messengers, taking even her right to offer loyalty. She hates you from the depths of her being, and doesn’t like me much better. Everything she despises, I see as a gift greater than I can ever reciprocate.”

“Assuming I give you the chance to go out and do something with that gift.”

“I believe you will, sooner or later. I still don’t understand what you get out of mercy, but I believe you do get something.”

Asano gave Marek a long, assessing look before speaking.

“The greatest martial arts trainer my world ever produced was asked by one of his students why he showed mercy to an enemy. He said that for a person with no forgiveness in their heart, living is a worse punishment than death. I’m paraphrasing; his accent was a bit sketchy.”

“It may take me some time to understand that for myself. And if I do, I could easily see myself rejecting the principle. Mercy is leaving the roots of trouble to grow back stronger.”

“Mercy can seem like foolishness, and perhaps it is. But it’s also the hope for tomorrow. Ruthlessness will never turn an enemy into a friend. It leaves only barren ground, in the world and in your soul. I’ve seen that in a half-dozen years of having power, so you must have seen it over and over.”

“I have,” Marek confirmed. “Barren worlds and barren souls are how messengers operate.”

“Well, if you’re going to stage a revolution anyway, maybe consider revisiting that policy. There’s a term in my world, ‘Carthaginian peace.’ It means to set terms of peace,

following a military victory, that cripple the defeated so they cannot recover and rebuild. To take those who have been put down and keep them down.”

Asano sighed before continuing.

“There was a war in my world. The Great War. A tangled mess of political alliances turned one incident into a globe-spanning conflict. The war to end all wars, they called it.”

“There is never an end to war.”

“No,” Asano agreed. “No, there isn’t. When the Great War was done, there was a peace treaty into which the victors placed what became known as the war guilt clause. It lay all blame at the feet of the vanquished. It stripped them of power, of dignity. Of the ability to rebuild in the face of the greatest conflict my world had ever seen.”

“The seed of a new war?” Marek asked. He had seen many worlds and Asano’s tale was a familiar one.

“Yes. From the ashes of a fallen nation rose a monster. He raised that country from the ashes using pride and hate, fed on the bitterness of a people who had been spat on and ground into the dirt. The next war was worse, worse than anyone ever imagined. There are few cases where war has truly right and wrong sides, but evil was spreading across the world. Even then, those who were supposed to be on the right side used weapons that annihilated entire cities full of civilians. Much as your people tried to do here in Yaresh. Oddly enough, your people cannot match mine for bending the power of creation to unconscionable ends. Our weapons of mass destruction proved more effective than your apocalypse beast.”

“What came of the garuda that stopped the naga genesis egg?”

“If anyone knows, they haven’t told me. He vanished while you and I were underground. But the battle we fought here in Yaresh was nothing compared to the war I’m talking about. Of the nations that were the primary instigators of the war, one was in the east and the other in the west. In the east, it was a nation called Japan. One of the many countries opposing them was Australia. My country, although I would not be born for another half-century.”

Asano smiled and gestured at his face.

“My mother’s people come from Australia and my father’s from Japan. As ugly and brutal as that war became, as much as millions suffered and died, the day came when those nations were not enemies but allies. That change came about in your lifetime; probably only a fragment of it. There is always a future, Marek. You could say I’m the living embodiment of that. You have told me over and over that you want to build a new future for your people. Mercy is the only way to build a future worth bothering with.”

Marek did not respond, instead thinking at length on what Jason had said. He was still thinking when Jason spoke again.

“It’s time. Out you pop, chief.”

Jason warily kept his senses locked on both Amos and Marek as Marek emerged from the portal. They both tensed up on spotting one another, auras sharp as weapons, but neither opened hostilities. They were inside a dome atop the roof of Jason’s cloud palace. Jason’s presence flooded the area, which he had made a part of his spirit domain. His domain had neither the power nor the influence of his soul realm, through the still-active portal, but it still allowed him to command considerable power.

“Be civil,” Jason told them. “This is a conversation, not a war.”

“He and his kind brought war to this city,” Amos pointed out. The intensity of his gaze fell just short of boring through the messenger’s head.

“I was merely doing as commanded.”

“Okay,” Jason said, pointing a finger at Marek’s face. “You and I are going to have some long conversations about the ‘just following orders’ defence, but in the meantime, no more war talk. From either of you.”

Jason’s gaze moved from Marek to Amos.

“Marek, here,” Jason told Amos, “has agreed to give up the goods on how messengers use their auras. In return, I’ve told him that you won’t crush his skull to paste in your bare hands, okay?”

Marek and Jason both looked at Amos’ hands. They remained at his sides but his fingers were flexing as if aching to do exactly what Jason had just described.

“Why would you betray your own kind?” Amos asked Marek.

“I don’t betray my kind,” Marek told him. “I betray the astral kings who betrayed their own kind long before I emerged from the birthing tree.”

“The birthing tree?” Amos asked.

“Messengers are born from trees,” Jason said. “I think that means they’re technically plants, but we shouldn’t get side-tracked. We’re here for Marek to teach us about messenger auras.”

“I ask again,” Amos said, his glare still locked on Marek’s face. “Why would he do that?”

“I have long wished to undermine the astral kings,” Marek said. “Not for your people, but for mine. We are slaves, indoctrinated to think our bondage is glory, our servitude

superiority. In freeing me from that bondage, Jason Asano has done something I did not think possible. Now I am free to act, if Asano ever releases me to do so.”

“That doesn’t answer the question,” Amos growled.

“Doesn’t it?” Jason asked. “You don’t know gratitude when you hear it?”

“From a messenger?”

“I am as surprised as you,” Marek told Amos, who turned back to face the messenger.

“You’re saying that you serve Asano now?”

“No. He could have made me and mine his slave, but instead, he gave me the freedom to serve no one and nothing but my own ideals.”

Marek glanced at Jason, then back to Amos.

“He showed me mercy.”

“I won’t,” Amos said. “If you serve your own messenger ideals, I should put you down before you get the chance to spread them.”

“That’s enough,” Jason said sharply, drawing on the power of his spirit domain. Although a foot shorter than Amos and two shorter than Marek, His presence loomed over them. Both Marek and Amos had supreme aura senses, but they didn’t need them to know exactly who owned the ground on which they stood.

“I know what Marek is offering sounds too good to be true,” Jason told Amos. “All the techniques messengers use for aura combat, freely offered up. Mostly freely. Kind of freely. I mean, yes, he’s my prisoner and I told him that it was a condition of me ever letting him out. One condition of many. So, not freely at all. But still, offered up.”

Jason resisted smiling as Amos and Marek looked at him with the exact same mix of exasperation, wariness and disbelief.

“It’s hard to believe, I know,” Jason told Amos. “I bring out a messenger commander who claims that I’ve done something mysterious and now he wants to go off and fight the astral kings instead of continuing the invasion of his world.”

“I am decades, if not centuries from taking any fight to the astral kings,” Marek said. “What I seek is the chance to plant a seed. A seed that may, in time, grow into a tree of revolution.”

“You realise that plants don’t revolve right?” Jason asked him. “Are you just big on plant metaphors? You know, because you’re a plant.”

“I am not a plant.”

“Bloke, you fell off a tree like an apple. Is dimensional scrumping a major impediment to your reproductive process?”

“Please be serious, Jason Asano.”

Jason laughed.

“Mate, you picked the wrong astral king to hitch your wagon to if you don't want jokes. No promises on the quality of said jokes, mind you, and they may just be me talking about old episodes of *Monkey Magic*.”

Amos and Marek looked at him with a mix of disapproval and confusion.

“Yeah, I know,” Jason conceded. “it's just called *Monkey*, not *Monkey Magic*, but it really should have been.”

He started patting the pockets of his tan shorts.

“I have a recording crystal with the theme song, let me find it and you'll see what I'm talking about—”

“The messenger is right, Asano,” Amos cut him off. “This is not the time for your childishness.”

The amusement fell off Jason's face instantly, as if he'd been waiting for the interruption. He tapped into his spiritual domain again, using the space around them to lightly pressure Amos' aura.

“Lord Pensinata,” Jason said. “You need to learn from my team and pay attention to what I do, not what I say. Does it feel like I'm not taking this seriously? We both know how strong your aura is. Try throwing it around and see how far it gets you.”

Amos turned a glare on Jason which would have had most Rimaros adventurers trembling. Jason stared up at the taller man uncowed.

“I'm not your nephew or some mewling guild member, Lord Pensinata; don't bother with the death stare. I've had a lot worse than you give me the evil eye.”

“You should not treat these situations with flippancy,” Amos told him.

“I've tried being grim and grave when things get heavy. It doesn't work out. I don't know if it's an overdeveloped sense of melodrama, but I don't like who it turns me into. Marek and I were just talking about mercy, and when I start spiralling down, I don't have any. If the price of me not killing a bunch of people is you putting up with the occasional *A-Team* reference — series, not film — then I suggest you suck it up. You can just ignore that while we otherwise talk things through like sensible adults. If that's too much for you to handle, Lord Pensinata, I suggest you run off and tell on me to the Adventure Society.”

Amos pushed back hard against Jason's aura. Jason was startled at its full strength, yet it was not enough in Jason's spirit domain where the very magic around them answered to him. Jason held Amos to a stalemate as Marek shielded himself without interfering. The floor beneath them and the dome over them started trembling with power

and Amos' eyes went wide. He slowly withdrew his aura and Jason matched him in backing off.

"How many secrets do you have, Asano?" Amos asked/

"Enough that I'm starting to regret sharing some of them with you, Lord Pensinata. Marek, go back inside. We won't be having any aura discussions today."

When the messenger was gone, the portal closed. The archway remained but the screen of light within disappeared.

"For a being that claims to be free, he does what you tell him readily enough," Amos said.

"We're done for the day, Lord Pensinata. I think we both need to think about how we each want to move forward from here."

"You engineered this confrontation," Amos accused. "You knew what my reaction would be to you bringing out a gold-rank messenger who is personally responsible for untold death and destruction, and you did so in a place where you have the power."

"Yes," Jason admitted. "That's exactly what I did."

"Are you looking to put me in my place somehow? That will end very badly for you."

"I'm aware, but I'm not trying to put you in your place, Lord Pensinata. I'm trying to make you understand that you're wrong about *my* place. You and the diamond-rankers and the Adventure Society all think you know what my place is. I've barely advanced my essence abilities in the last couple of years and that's all you see. But make no mistake, Lord Pensinata, my power has grown to a level you can't understand until you step through that portal. The one you refuse to, because of the danger."

"My place is not what you think, Lord Pensinata, and I'm tired of playing upstart. I will bend when bending is the best choice, because yes: I am, for now, a silver-ranker. But I'm not just a silver-ranker. The messengers understand that; Soramir Rimaros understands that. The gods understand that. The day is coming, Lord Pensinata, when you will need to grow a Tom Selleck moustache or get out of my way."

Amos frowned, not in anger but in thoughtfulness. He stared at Jason for a long time in silence, while Jason waited. Jason knew the man well enough to keep his mouth shut for once. Finally, Amos spoke.

"If you were anyone else, I would say you are a child shouting into the void. But you told the Builder to leave and he did."

"It was more like making a deal than—"

"Learn when to stop talking, Asano; I have no doubt your mouth gets you in twice as much trouble as it gets you out of. But I am forced to acknowledge that your claims of

power outside your essence abilities are not without merit. If you say that you can stand up to diamond-rankers and suborn messengers then I will accept it. Until such time as you prove you cannot.”