

Chapter 660

Imperfect Responses

The messenger Jes Fin Kaal was hovering just over the flat roof of a circular tower in a messenger stronghold. She was looking out over the rainforest contemplatively when another messenger floated up through the round hole in the middle of the roof. It was the dark-skinned and silver-haired Hess Jor Nasala, who was subordinate to Kaal. Not only was Kaal gold-rank to his silver, but she was also a Voice of the Will.

“Our agents in the city have reached out,” he reported. “The investigation into them has been suspended for the moment as the Adventure Society moves to respond to the world-taker worms. As you predicted, they are committing significant forces to the eradication, now they have discovered the threat. They are moving even more quickly than anticipated.”

“Will that affect the readiness of our forces?” Kaal asked, not turning her eyes from the vista.

“It will not, Voice. The wing leaders are prepared to move on the city at your command.”

Kaal nodded.

“Inform the wing commander that he may move at his discretion,” Kaal ordered. “But first, I would like to hear you out on something.”

“It would be my honour, Voice Kaal.”

“Since my arrival here, I have found your counsel to be sound, Hess Jor Nasala. I am grappling with an issue and would value your perspective.”

“Of course.”

“Pei Vas Kartha is dead.”

Hess frowned in thought until he recalled the name.

“One of the worm breeders? My understanding is that we assigned the least of us to those positions exactly because of the risk.”

“Indeed we did,” Kaal said. “That choice, however, has now presented us with an unanticipated problem.”

“There was an issue with Pei Vas Kartha’s death?”

“Yes. We have an enemy whom, through intention or happenstance, has found a way to bring us trouble.”

“How so?”

"I felt Pei Vas Kartha's death. It was ugly, but that, in and of itself, is not the concern. The problem is that before she died, her will was broken. She came to accept that something stood above the messengers in superiority."

"Then she was deserving of death. I see now why sending the least of us was a problem. What of the others?"

"Most escaped. Several died, but none in shame, like Pei Vas Kartha. I believe what happened to her does not reflect a new approach by the enemy forces, but an individual within them."

"You believe it is this man Asano?"

"I consider it likely. I have dangerous suspicions about him."

"Dangerous?"

"Do you think it is possible for there to be a silver-rank astral king? One that does not come from within our own kind, no less?"

"In my experience, Voice, it is unwise to count anything as wholly impossible."

"Wise," she said with a nod. "What do you see as the central problem in finding an approach to deal with Asano?"

Hess did not respond immediately and gave the question consideration.

"Ambiguity," he said after thinking it over. "Any action we take has the potential to ripple negatively through our people. If he truly is an astral king, do we venerate him or strike him down? If we venerate someone not a messenger, it undermines the core tenets of our people's pride and self-image. If we eliminate him, it undermines the absolute authority of the astral kings."

"Yes," Kaal agreed. "But there is an aspect that makes that question of whether to kill him not a question at all."

"That if he truly is an astral king, he deserves veneration."

"Exactly. If he is not, that simplifies things. If he is, he is more complicated to respond to as a threat."

"Do we need to respond at all?" Hess asked.

"Yes," Kaal said. "The death of Pei Vas Kartha is the beginning, not the end. If we leave him free to wreak havoc, he will."

Hess frowned.

"If we are going to target him, the knowledge of what he did to Pei Vas Kartha may give our less strong-willed people reason to hesitate. If one of us is willing to acknowledge this man as superior, what if he is? Allowing seeds of doubt to be planted into the soil of our faith is dangerous."

“But if we keep what he did a secret, it will be fine so long as it remains a secret. If not, we’ll be seen as tacitly acknowledging his superiority, seeking to crush him before the truth spreads.”

“Are our people so weak-willed that they would be swayed so easily?”

“We are a people built on a faith that everyone we oppress seeks to challenge. Doubt is no more than a pinprick to the faithful, but a pinprick that carries poison. Enough of it will bring down even the mightiest beast. And even in our own ranks, there are those who would question our values. As superior beings, we must be allowed freedom of thought, but that freedom inevitably breeds dissenters.”

“Do you see this being a problem amongst the forces on this world?”

“I do not,” Kaal said, “but if I could predict these people I would have eradicated them already. This man who killed Pei Vas Kartha, be it Asano or someone else, offers us only imperfect responses to his deed. Whatever we do, including nothing at all, will bring complications. My greatest concern is if this was their intention. That suggests an enemy not to be taken lightly.”

Hess did not respond, knowing better than to talk for the sake of it. Instead, he considered the problem at hand. After musing on it for some time, he spoke up.

“Perhaps we need to recontextualise how we see him,” he suggested. “We are unused to viewing astral kings as enemies. If we can resolve his identity as an enemy with his identity as an astral king, it may be possible to turn him from a problem into a solution.”

“Go on,” Kaal told him.

“The Adventure Society and the rulers of the elven city know about the natural array and the threat it poses, not just to us but to them. They have even sent diplomatic envoys more than once. The wing commander executed them, of course. While assistance would be useful, we cannot be seen working with the servant races. But we need essence users to deal with the array, which is why we have been enslaving them.”

“I have seen these servants,” Kaal said. “Those who will kneel before us are too weak-willed to resist the array’s effects.”

“But if an astral king were to be the representative of the local denizens, that would be an acceptable alliance. We can have them send those with the required strength of will.”

Kaal finally turned to look at Hess.

“An interesting idea. An astral king is an acceptable ally, but we must be sure that it is an astral king we are dealing with. He needs to be tested.”

“Use Fal Vin Garath. He lacks leadership and strategic abilities, but every messenger is superior in their own way. Even if he dies to Asano, he will never break. His faith is unassailable.”

Kaal nodded.

“Have the wing commander detach a group in the city attack to target Asano specifically. If he is hard to track as our agents have suggested, target his team.”

“And if Asano hides during the attack?”

“Then that, itself, is an answer.”

The town was a killing field, blanketed in dead. The elves had been enemies, but really, they were victims. The worms had not just killed them but driven their bodies to attack the team. As a result, the people Jason and his companions should have saved were stacked in corpse piles across the town.

The powers of essence users were unkind in their violence. Bodies were piled up in mounds, men, women and children left in states that were chilling to look at. Flesh scorched or rotted black. Severed limbs, hewn torsos and heads cleft apart.

Now that the fighting was mostly over, the team had time to see what they had made of what had looked like an ordinary happy town on their arrival. Knowing that the parasitic worms had sealed the fate of the town long before their arrival was cold comfort as they made their way through the thousands of dead that carpeted the streets.

At some stage, whatever mind was controlling them decided to take what hosts remained and fled. This left the team to the grim task of hunting them down, which felt uncomfortably like following up a massacre of civilians by eliminating the fleeing witnesses. Jason returned to the team who were moving as a loose group through the town.

“We’re not having trouble catching the elves serving as worm hosts,” Humphrey told Jason. “The elves can’t outrun me, let alone Sophie. The problem is the worms that have been crawling off on their own. They’ve gone into the trees, the houses, the rice fields; we’re pretty sure some of them just started digging down. With your senses and Shade’s bodies for mobility, you can find and deal with them quicker than the rest of us combined.”

Sophie returned in a blur, stopping in front of Jason. She peered into his dark hood.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I noticed this earlier,” she said, “but I can see your head.”

“I can see your head too,” he told her.

“You can see his head?” Humphrey asked as the others crammed themselves next to Sophie to look into Jason’s hood.

“What exactly is going on?” Jason asked, acting disgruntled. He knew the team were trying to distract themselves from the horrors around them and the part they played in it. If ignoring it with a little forced humour helped them cope even a little better, he was happy to play along. He remembered his own similar experience on Earth and wanted the team to deal with it better than he had under similar circumstances.

“Your hood used to completely hide your head,” Humphrey said. “It was just darkness in there. Then you came back and we could see your eyes, but nothing else. Now we can see your head. Kind of. The silhouette of your head.”

“Especially your chin,” Sophie said. “With your rank-ups and your beard, it seemed a lot less pointy than before. Seeing it stick out of the dark like that, though, you’re really reminded that you could put someone’s eye out with that thing.”

“It does not stick out,” Jason insisted. “If it did, you’d have noticed it long ago. My cloak’s appearance changed back in Rimaros, and you’re only spotting the difference now?”

“In fairness,” Rufus said, arriving to join the group, “your cloak also looks like you’re wearing a portal now. You can’t blame us for missing a relatively minor detail.

“I don’t know that ‘minor’ is the word,” Belinda said.

“Lindy, go help Clive,” Jason told her. “He found some magic doors.”

“I’ll head off then,” she said agreeably. “If I need to pick a lock, I’ll call and you can bring your chin.”

While most of the team continued to round up elves, Jason went hunting worms that had left their hosts. He swept his senses over the town to find them and deployed Shade’s bodies as shadow-jumping targets. As for dealing with the worms, that was Colin’s area, with occasional help from Gordon. Most of the worms were making their way through the rice paddies, where Jason would sprinkle a few leeches and move on. Whether hidden in the water or buried in the mud, Colin would find and devour the lesser apocalypse beast.

Some of the worms had climbed into trees, hiding in the upper reaches. Gordon used his beam to cut off branches or even topple the entire tree, giving Colin easy access to them. It was a similar case in buildings where worms had hidden under floorboards or between wall panels. Gordon opened them up and Colin happily undertook his grisly work.

They wanted to be thorough in eradicating the worms, as there were uncertainties about how they reproduced. They did not match Colin, who could eat to multiply, but they

had at least some means of self-replication. The worms could soak up the life energy in healing magic used on their hosts to reproduce, although there were possibly limits to that. Otherwise, what was the point of the underground breeding centre?

Carlos had given them some information about the creatures, but his knowledge was far from comprehensive. The worms were not a native species to Pallimustus, which was fortunate but made information hard to come by. Hunting down the errant worms might have been critical or futile, they just didn't know. It was more likely than not that there were many towns in similar situations.

Jason made several wide-ranging passes over and around the town to be sure as he could that he'd gotten them all. He then reconvened with the team back in the underground worm-breeding facility. Colin had finished the last of the worms there, the leeches Jason left behind clearing out the last ones that had escaped down the stairs. Colin had them moved onto the ones floating in vats, swimming through the unappealing yellow liquid.

Clive and Belinda spent that time assessing the place. The two anomalies that Clive had spotted were places where hidden doors would open by shifting sections of wall or floor. Belinda had traced out the doors and the opening mechanisms, but hadn't triggered them yet. She wanted to carefully assess them for traps and other fail-safes before taking any action.

"Why secret doors?" Neil wondered. "This place is secret already, right?"

"Maybe it was from when they were first setting up," Clive postulated. "There's no way all this was put in place without people noticing things, even using magic. They would need collaborators with authority, like the mayor or some influential local elders. Whatever is behind these doors might have been the things the messengers were worried would give the collaborators second thoughts."

"Once you're helping someone turn everyone in your town into a worm-incubating corpse," Neil said, "I think you're past the point of second thoughts."

"Perhaps that was the point," Belinda suggested. "These vats are all in the open now, but there are signs of them having been moved. The messengers might have convinced the collaborators that it was a more conventional attack. Stockpiling weapons or something; good old-fashioned treason. In the meantime, the first batch of worms was being cultivated in the hidden rooms. Once the collaborators don't matter, are in too deep or have just been infested themselves, the operation expands and the vats come out."

"Would they actually work with elves, though? Aren't all we non-messengers races too unworthy to work alongside?"

“Given that any collaborators are doubtless worm-filled corpses right now, I doubt the messengers thought of it like that. They wanted it to be secret, so they used the people of this town as necessary. I doubt they even thought of turning on them as a betrayal.”

“It doesn’t matter what happened or why,” Sophie said. “The Adventure Society will be crawling over this place soon enough. Let them figure it out. I just want to find the ones who think they can do this to people and bury my fist in their heads.”

“We’ll have some answers once we open these doors,” Belinda said. “Maybe that will help us find a head for you to put a fist inside of.”

She was crouched down in front of the secret door set into one of the walls. She had drawn a variety of sigils around it and left strange-looking magical tools laying around.

“I don’t know enough about their aura magic to stop the trap on this door from being triggered when we open it,” Belinda explained. “I’m disconnecting the trap altogether, so we should be able to trigger it and have nothing happen.”

“*Should* be able to?” Neil asked.

“If you don’t think I’ll get it right,” Belinda told him, “You can disconnect the trap yourself. You want to take over?”

He held up his hands in surrender.

“That’s what I thought,” she said, turning back to her work. “This trap is a bit funny, though.”

“Funny how?” Humphrey asked.

“The trap isn’t pointing out.”

“Not pointing out?” Humphrey asked. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that this door was rigged so that if you open it, you kill whoever is inside, not whoever is out here.”

“That implies prisoners,” Rufus said. “I think we’d best get that door open as quickly as it can be done safely.”

“And here was me about to take a sandwich break,” Belinda said.

“It’s not necessarily prisoners,” Humphrey said. “The messengers are happy to use an apocalypse beast as a weapon. It could be some other dangerous creature.”

“Using an apocalypse beast,” Jason muttered reproachfully, shaking his head. “The maniacs.”

The team all turned to give him a flat look.

“What?” he asked innocently.