

## 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?"

"Haresh 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.

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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."

## Chapter 647

### Stories About Fungus

Urman Vohl had pulled back to throw the folder full of papers across the room when he stopped himself, closed his eyes and put the folder back down on his desk. His sons, Valk and Emresh, stood anxiously in the middle of the office.

“Another one,” Urman snarled. “That’s two in the time it’s taking the broker to get here. You are certain he’s coming, aren’t you, Valk?”

“Yes father,” the older brother said.

Urman’s office was midway up one of the inner city towers; prestigious but not overreaching. Understanding where to headquarter oneself was an important part of maintaining a reputation in Yaresh. It demonstrated a self-valuation that could hurt one’s interests if they were to over-or-under-evaluate their position in society.

A knock at the door was followed by some of Urman’s less thuggish men escorting a small elf in a well-made but not ostentatious suit. Like Urman’s office, his clothes were carefully aligned with his societal position. Despite being in Urman’s office and surrounded by his people, the elf looked unperturbed. He was a silver-rank core user, but his aura was sharply controlled, giving away none of his emotions.

“Mr Vohl,” the small elf said. “Your people bringing me here is pushing quite firmly against the boundaries of propriety.”

“Jasich Tovill,” Urman said with a glower. “You’re going to stand there and talk about pushing boundaries when you have been interfering with my business?”

“I have nothing to do with your business, Mr Vohl.”

“In the last three days, no fewer than nineteen of my debtors have paid their loans in full, immediately after getting loans from you.”

“You are incorrect in two regards, Mr Vohl. Firstly, the loans facilitated by myself have nothing to do with your loans, simply because they went to the same people in several instances. If you disagree, you will find my legal advocates downright eager to explain the difference before a civil magistrate. Secondly, they are not my loans. Loans have been executed through me, but it is my client from whom the loans are issued, not me.”

“And who is your client?”

“None of your business, Mr Vohl.”

“Father,” Emresh said angrily. “Let me—”

“Quiet,” Urman dismissively commanded.

“Yes,” Jasich greed. “You’ve done your father quite enough damage.”

“What does that mean?” Urman asked.

“I apologise,” Jasich said. “I spoke out of turn.”

“My father asked you a—”

“Shut your mouth!” Urman snapped at Emresh, then turned his gaze on Jasich.

“I have no patience for your games, broker. Tell me who your client is or you'll find unfortunate coincidences starting to befall your interests.”

Jasich sighed.

“As it happens,” he said, “My client anticipated a scenario quite like this and issued directions accordingly. I have been given, should I be put under duress, permission to reveal that my client is a member of the Nareen family, out of Rimaros.”

“The Storm Kingdom?” Urman asked. “What do they want with a handful of businesses in the Yareh entertainment district?”

“My client, as it happens, is also a go-between. She has no interest in the entertainment district or the business involved.”

“She's doing this for someone else?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“She has only involved herself to protect someone.”

“Protect who?” Urman asked. “My debtors? This mysterious person behind her?”

“No, Mr Vohl. She's doing this to protect you.”

“Me? Who and what do you think I need protection from?”

“Someone within your organisation has offended a person they very much should not have.”

Remembering the broker's earlier statement, seemingly made offhand, Urman looked to his younger son before turning back to Jasich as he continued his explanation.

“Mr Vohl, the offended party knows that if they retaliate against this member of your organisation, events would escalate to the point where they would be required to kill you and everyone around you before there were no more people to come seeking revenge.”

“Even if this person could do that,” Urman said, “the city authorities wouldn't just sit back in the face of that much killing.”

“I don't know the identity of the person in question,” Jasich said, “but I am assured that he is unconcerned about any authorities. It seems an outlandish claim, but given the identity of my client, not one I can entirely dismiss. However, doing all of that would go against the person's current desire for anonymity. He, therefore, decided that he shall satisfy his need for revenge by interfering with your interests rather than melting down your



flesh and carrying you around in a bucket. That is a direct quote, by the way, and one I am assured can be taken quite literally, other than potentially requiring multiple buckets or perhaps a drum. My client is attempting to prevent that person from deciding you are worth casting aside their anonymity over. She knows that going through me is something you would be willing to do, but going through her is not.”

Urman leaned back in his chair, considering the broker's words. Jasich stood in place, patient and unconcerned, while Emresh was agitated, unable to keep his hands and feet still without fidgeting. His older brother, Valk, was more composed, but still showed signs of uncertainty in his expression. During the long silence, Emresh looked like he was about to speak several times before either stopping himself or being stopped by a harsh glare from his brother. Finally, Urman spoke.

“Broker. Sell me the loans you have issued.”

“As I have already explained, Mr Vohl, they are not my loans. I merely carried them out.”

“You’re a smart man, Mr Tovill. I’m sure you can figure something out.”

“What I have figured out, Mr Vohl, is that if you keep pushing, your best result would be humiliating failure.”

“You think failure is the best I can do?”

“If you do anything, Mr Vohl, I am the only person in this room who will still be alive at week's end.”

Urman grimaced but refrained from another outburst.

“Take Mr Tovill home,” he told his minions, who took Jasich out, leaving Urman and his sons. “Emresh, what did you do?”

“Nothing.”

“Don’t lie to me, boy.”

“Really, nothing. It was a normal week.”

“You didn’t hurt anyone?” Valk asked. “Make anyone angry?”

“Of course I hurt people,” Emresh said. “I just said it was a normal week?”

“Who were these people you hurt?” Urman asked.

“I didn’t make a list.”

“Emresh,” Valk said. “You are the only one of us that spends time in the entertainment district. You know the people there, yes?”

“Sure I do.”

“Out of the people you hurt, which ones were strangers?” Valk asked.

“What makes you think it was someone I hurt?” Emresh asked. “The broker said offended, and how would I hurt some death-dealing savage who could take us all out?”

“A not inconsiderable point,” Urman acknowledged. “It could have been anyone he encountered. The best move, for now, is to find out more about the broker's client. Valk, look into any members of house Nareen in the city.”

“What do I do?” Emresh asked.

“Go home,” Urman said. “My townhouse, not your place in the entertainment district. Stay there until I tell you otherwise. I'll have my men make sure you go, and tell your mother you aren't to leave.”

“You're telling mum on me?”

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Jason's team was in Clive's skimmer, moving south over the forest canopy. For once, Jason himself had joined them.

“While it's good that we're operating alone so you can come with us,” Humphrey told him, “this isn't a low-stakes contract to slowly get used to working together with. We're one of seven teams, four of which have gold rankers attached. We're all scouting out the region south of the city. No one has heard anything from anyone in that direction for days, including from the first two teams sent to look into it.”

“Why split up all the teams?” Belinda asked. “Isn't that asking to be picked off in isolation?”

“Because the area we're covering is so large,” Humphrey told her. “As far as anyone can determine, the entire southern approach is cut off. The Adventure Society wants this dealt with before a panic starts.”

“*Should* a panic be starting?” Neil asked.

“That's what we're trying to find out,” Humphrey said. “The local teams are checking the main thoroughfares south. We've been assigned to hop between smaller and more isolated communities, along with Korinne's team and another group of out-of-towners.”

“So we get the low priority tasks,” Neil griped.

“Be grateful,” Humphrey said. “The teams with gold rankers are going after the main routes, which is where the most dangerous threats are likely to be. Otherwise, the larger towns would have gotten the word out before going silent.”

“We can handle dangerous,” Sophie said. “Unless it's something gold rank.”

“Rank isn't the only source of danger,” Clive warned. “Yes, we could handle most silver-rank monsters, but the Magic Society's monster almanac is filled with exotic threats. Not everything can be solved by punching.”

“That depends on how good at punching you are,” Sophie told him.

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In their own skimmer, Korinne’s team was also moving over the rainforest, trees just below them.

“Why couldn’t we just take the roads?” Polix wondered aloud. “It would take longer, yes, but we could have just left earlier.”

“The Adventure Society wanted us to avoid trouble on the way to the population centres,” Korinne said. “The comprehensiveness with which the southern region has gone silent suggests that the roads are compromised.”

“But running these skimmers in flight mode consumes a lot of spirit coins,” Polix said. “The Adventure Society is reimbursing us, right?”

“Of course they are,” Rosa said. “Isn’t that right Korinne?”

“It is,” Korinne said. “They will fully reimburse us.”

“Why do you not sound convincing?” Polix asked.

“They will reimburse us,” Korinne said. “More or less.”

“More or less?” Kalif asked. “We’re fuelling this thing out of party funds. What does more or less mean?”

“It means that the society is currently funnelling supplies to the conflict with the messengers,” Korinne said. “They’re still paying out contracts, but non-urgent reimbursements are being paid out in credit bonds.”

“What are credit bonds?” Kalif asked.

“It’s a token that you can use to reclaim an owed amount at a later date.”

“How much later?” Polix asked.

“A year.”

“A year? We won’t be around in a year!”

“You can claim them at other branches,” Korinne said.

“Do we still have to wait the year if we do that?” Polix asked.

“Only if you want the full eighty-five percent,” Korinne said.

“What do you mean, eighty-five percent?” Polix asked.

“There’s a slight fee for claiming the token at a branch other than the non-issuing one,” Korinne said.

“We should never have taken this contract,” Polix complained. “Self-funding a trip into some vaguely defined area where people keep vanishing? Including adventurers?”

“Maybe the whole region is overrun with something,” Rosa suggested. “I’ve heard stories about fungus that can overtake whole towns in one night.”

"I once saw a carnivorous vine the size of a large town," Zara said. "It was in an astral space, part of the mass expedition that Emir Bahadir arranged five years ago. Iron rankers only, with promising young teams from across the world. It was a good chance to meet with other royalty."

"Did you kill the vine monster?" Kalif asked.

"It wasn't a monster," Zara explained. "It was some kind of alchemically modified plant creature that had been left to grow wild for centuries. It had buried itself underground, but had vines on the surface, amongst the regular overgrowth. It would attack anyone that entered its territory. Dozens of adventurers teamed up to deal with it."

"A single giant organism?" Polix asked.

"Yes," Zara confirmed.

"Affliction specialist," Polix said. "Even a whole bunch of adventurers won't get it done. You need someone that can keep scaling damage endlessly to handle something that big."

"Except that it wasn't that easy," Zara said. "We were iron-rank, and you know what affliction specialists are like at that rank."

"Crap area specialists," Kalif said. "Nothing is tough enough to make afflictions worthwhile. Faster and easier to just run around killing stuff the regular way."

"Yes," Zara said. "It's why only a few teams brought them. And they were all specialised in area afflictions, which don't have escalating effects until higher rank. Fortunately, there was one focused affliction specialist, part of a local team."

"A focused affliction specialist?" Korinne asked. "They're even weaker than area affliction specialists at low rank. And as for high ranks, they're just worthless against anything but one giant creature."

"If they really are affliction specialists, yes," Zara agreed. "The person in question became an affliction skirmisher."

Everyone except Polix who was driving turned to look at Zara.

"Yes," she said with a small, weary sigh. "I was talking about him. It was the first time I saw him, although he wouldn't see me until later."

"You need to get over that guy," Rosa said. "I don't think he's especially keen on you, Princess."

"It's not princess anymore," Zara said.

"Which I believe about as much as you not being obsessed with the guy you joined our team over," Rosa told her. "Maybe try to avoid letting out a little sigh when you talk about him and it might come across as more believable."

“You realise he’s probably listening to all of this,” Kalif said. “That shadow familiar of his is sneaky.”

“I keep sensing him skulking around,” Rosa said. As the team scout, she had the best perception amongst them. “I’m sure he’s getting harder to spot, though.”

“I appreciate you saying so, Miss Liselos,” Shade said from her shadow. “I need to refine my skills again with each summoner I am familiar to, and you have been very good practise.”

## Chapter 648

### Vampire Monster Slaves

Korinne's team paused their progress over the rainforest to fend off a large group of spider monkeys. These were not the spider monkeys of Earth, as they had four extra arms, shot webbing from their hands and poison barbs from the tips of their tails. They also were more aggressively omnivorous, still enthusiastic about fruit while also mixing anyone they could catch into their diet.

The rainforest canopy was an environment that was a mixed bag for the team. They could all get by on silver-rank agility, but some fared better than others in the trees.

Rather than slaughter all the monkeys, the team drove them off with a show of force, with only a few of the creatures dying. They were not monsters but native magical beasts, and the rainforest canopy was their natural habitat, so they were only a threat to anyone roaming the treetops, who would generally be able to handle themselves.

The team were returning to the skimmer hovering over the canopy, making their way up through the shadowy canopy, when Rosa, the scout, froze. She turned to peer into the shadows as the rest of the team readied themselves on seeing her reaction. They took tactical positions, floating in the air or perched on branches. Only Zara was out of step, not having the years of training and working together that had the others in perfect sync.

Two blue and orange, eye-shaped nebulas appeared in the dark. Realising it was Jason didn't do much to relax the team and they remained on alert.

"How did you get so close?" Rosa asked. "You didn't use to be this good."

"The entire reason we're all together like this is so that Lord Pensinata can train my aura use," Jason told her. "It would be a little strange if I wasn't improving."

"But this fast?"

"Wait until you see a messenger," Jason said. "You'll realise that this isn't fast enough."

"What are you doing here, Asano?" Korinne asked. "You should be with your own team."

"I just wanted a word with your newest team member."

"Last I heard, you wanted nothing to do with her."

"Yes, well," Jason said, his voice embarrassed. "I kind of have this thing where I make grandiose statements of principle and intent, only to immediately realise I have to go back on them for practical reasons. Lady Nareen has undertaken a task at my behest and I wanted to discuss it."

"I don't think now is the best time," Korinne said.

"Yeah," Jason acknowledged, "but we're off to fight evil and I've learned it's best to seize the moment. I die kind of a lot."

"It's fine," Zara said. "I'll catch up."

The team shared unhappy glances but made their way up to the skimmer while Zara activated a privacy screen. She was standing on a small floating cloud that roiled like a storm. Jason emerged from the shadows, sitting casually on a branch as he pushed the hood back off his head.

"There are a lot of conveniently strong and horizontal branches up here," he observed. "Is that normal? I don't know a lot about trees outside of their use in landscape architecture, and I mostly forgot all of that stuff. It's what my dad did for a living."

"Did, past-tense? Your father died?" Zara asked.

"What? No, there was a monster apocalypse and he's fixing one of my places. A bunch of gold rankers dug it up looking for treasure, the pricks. I'm not sure I was paying him, now that I think about it. I probably should be. He's going to have some wages racked up by the time I get back."

"Did you just come here to talk nonsense?" Zara asked.

"It's generally a safe bet," Jason said with a disarmingly vulnerable smile. "But this time, I came to thank you for helping me with that property developer thug."

"You supplied the money," Zara said. "All it took me was a couple of hours and my name."

Jason nodded.

"And you got to see what a hypocrite I am," he said. "I was against you joining the convoy because your background would bring trouble. And then I asked you to flaunt your name the first chance I got."

"That's not why you didn't want me to join," Zara said softly. "You weren't thinking of the trouble I'd bring, but the trouble I already had. That my whole family brought you, but you never would have been involved with us, if not for me."

Jason knew that was wrong, as Soramir had been watching him from the moment he and Farrah returned to Pallimustus. He doubted Zara was faking ignorance, which meant that Soramir had not told her, leading to more self-recrimination than she was entitled to. He knew himself well enough to realise that not telling her that himself was petty, but he could live with being a little petty.

"Probably," Jason he agreed.

Zara sat down in her floating cloud, Jason laughing as her legs dangled out of the bottom.

“You know that I can do things for you without drawing too much attention,” she said. “For example, I didn’t need to throw my identity around. The name of House Nareen was plenty to settle the issue.”

“It’s not settled,” Jason told her. “Vohl is looking into you.”

“People, especially ambitious ones, don’t eat a loss quite so willingly,” Zara said dismissively. “It’s in hand. I’m not done with Mt Vohl.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Your plan doesn’t involve marrying any dead people, does it?”

“I learned that lesson,” she said, shooting him a flat look. “I think it’s time we both got back to our teams. I don’t know about yours, but mine is waiting.”

“Oh, mine doesn’t even know I’m gone,” Jason said. “But genuinely, thank you for handling the business with Vohl.”

“It’s not that big a concern,” she said. “It’s not like if I didn’t then you would really go ahead and kill them all.”

“No,” Jason said, his aura showing nothing but sincerity. “I suppose I wouldn’t.”

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Jason emerged from one of Shade’s bodies, arriving back on his team’s still-moving skimmer.

“Where did you go?” Humphrey asked in his best disappointed-mother voice.

“I didn’t go anywhere,” Jason said. “I’ve been here the whole time.”

Humphrey turned his gaze to Jason’s seat. Sitting in it was what looked like a mummy from an old movie, made up of bandages bound tightly around a roughly human-shaped cluster of leeches. Pinned to its forehead was a note with the word JASON written on it.

“In my defence,” Jason said, “I thought he’d take the blood clone form.”

“You thought that you, but red and mute, would be convincing?” Humphrey asked.

“Red, I might believe,” Sophie said. “Mute? No.”

“Come on Colin,” Jason said, gesturing at his familiar. “The cat’s out of the bag.” Colin suddenly lurched to his feet with a burst of enthusiasm.

“No,” Jason said. “I don’t have an actual cat in a bag for you to eat.”

The mummy’s shoulders slumped, prompting Jason to wonder why a bound up swarm of leeches had collective body language.



“I may have a fresh spider monkey,” Jason told him.

“He is not eating that in the skimmer,” Clive called out from the driver’s seat. “Not unless you’re supplying the crystal wash to clean it.”

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When Jason and his team drew closer to their destination they slowed to a stop. Clive carefully descended the skimmer below the canopy but paused high above the forest floor, out of the sun to hide amongst the trees. Jason went over the side, vanishing into the shadows as Shade’s bodies poured from his cloak to do the same.

The rainforest floor was a metropolis of shadows and obstacles; precisely the kind of place it would be foolish to fight someone like Jason. His team was waiting for Jason and Shade to scout the way forward, flickering from shadow to shadow in the gloom. Their destination was a small town, a dozen kilometres ahead, that had not been heard from in days. That was not unusual, being a small and relatively isolated place, but with the region increasingly going dark, Jason’s team had been sent to check. Every location they were scheduled to check was the same.

Jason didn’t go the entire way shadow jumping, as even his mana would suffer without a source of replenishment. He drew on his old techniques for navigating the Greenstone delta on foot, adapted as he ranked up, but never as practised as in his early days as an adventurer. It almost felt like he was back there with the hot, humid air.

One of Shade’s tertiary powers was the ability to be the locus of Jason’s non-combat abilities. Because that included his map ability, sending out Shade bodies was an excellent way to map out an area. It was Shade who first encountered the town, after which his other bodies started sweeping around it.

The town was surrounded by crop fields, divided up by lines of trees rather than fences. Rice paddies featured heavily, with many shade-houses lined up in rows for crops that weren’t as fond of the blazing sun. There were people working the fields, although most of the labour was being performed by construct creatures, built for purpose and directed by elf supervisors.

It looked normal at a glance, but something was tweaking Jason’s instincts. He kept himself hidden and his magical senses restrained. He made his way forward using the lines of trees that divided the fields, as well as the shade houses. He found a spot close to the town, inside a cluster of shrubbery at the end of one of the tree lines.

The town was unremarkable, with simple wooden buildings, often open-sided. Airflow and minimal obstruction seemed to be key to the design principles, and all of the buildings were painted the same dark green. It looked like the whole town had been repainted

recently as well. Jason could see right through many of the buildings, especially the houses. They were furnished in the same minimalist principles in which they were constructed. The internal spaces were open, with racks instead of cupboards, hammocks instead of beds, and open sides instead of walls.

Once again, the town populace seemed normal, but Jason's instinct that something was off was growing, even if he couldn't figure out what was tripping alarms for him. Before taking the risk of expanding his supernatural senses, Jason enhanced his physical ones. He started by pushing his vision into the thermal range. The immediate thing that stood out was the fact that every building had a heat bloom radiating from the new paintwork. It was counteracting the design of the buildings, making it harder for the airflow to cool them down.

Jason next turned his enhanced vision on the people. Elves were very much like humans under thermal vision, barring essence-related exceptions. The townsfolk all had unstable temperatures, with points all over their bodies soaking heat as if they were feeding on it.

As he focused on the people, it finally clicked for Jason was his instincts were picking out as wrong. Every person moved in the exact same way, from body language to simple gestures to stride. They greeted one another the same way, walked down the street the same way and picked out items at the small market the same way. It was as if the whole town was the same person with many different bodies.

"Bloody Stepford elves," he muttered.

"Mr Asano?" Shade asked.

"I think we've got a pod people situation," Jason said.

"Will you use the technique Lord Pensinata taught you to expand your senses without alerting people to your presence?"

"No," Jason said. "I'm still too inconsistent with it. I'll discuss it with the team before making any moves that could potentially set them off."

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"We definitely need a closer look," Jason said, having just explained what he saw to the team back at the skimmer. "I have an idea in my head, though, and if I'm right, these people might be able to sense me. The outworlder's aide, Benella, was almost certainly wearing some kind of aura mask that was applied from the outside, instead of being created by her."

"Is that even possible?" Belinda asked.

“Not using the magic we know,” Clive said. “But the last few years have seen our world flooded with outside magic. It only makes sense that the messengers have some as well.”

“These elves may be using aura masks as well,” Jason said. “They wouldn’t even have to be as good as the one Benella has. They would only need to hold up long enough to lure unsuspecting people into an ambush. For victims to wander into town and get taken out or taken over by whatever has a hold of those elves.”

“Why would the messengers want a town that occasionally kidnaps people passing through?” Sophie asked.

“To keep everything quiet while they build up a secret army. It prevents anyone from going home with stories about some weird stuff they saw in the town, plus the populace itself is the goal, so a few extra recruits would be welcome.”

“If they’re doing this all over the southern region,” Humphrey said, “then a massive army has formed on the borders of Yaresh without the city noticing. And if enough of the southern region was affected that the city did finally notice, then that army is basically in place. If someone sets them off, they may turn overt and move on the city.”

“Someone like any of seven teams roaming around right now, looking for bears to poke,” Jason said. “Now that the city has noticed something is going on, we have to assume these hidden enemies will move sooner rather than later.”

“Which leaves the question of what we do now,” Humphrey said. “Looking closer may trigger them, but we need to know what we’re dealing with.”

“From what Jason described,” Clive said, “I would assume some manner of body control.”

“Like that spider in the Order of the Reaper’s astral space?” Sophie asked. “The one that turned all those monsters into an army of vampire monster slaves.”

“Oh, great,” Neil said. “I can’t wait to relive the horrifying pitched battle where we almost died after fighting for hours against a relentless horde.”

“It might be worth enquiring with Carlos,” Clive suggested. “Jason’s observations suggest a heat-consuming parasite that takes over the body. As Carlos specialises in things that take over the body, he might have some insight into what we’re dealing with.”

## Chapter 649

### The Face of Insurmountable Power

Messenger architecture was obsessed with circles. Their buildings were circular, as was the pattern in which they were laid out. The wall around each of their strongholds was also a circle. The wall was only ten feet tall, which would hardly even slow down a silver-rank adventurer, but the wall itself was not the obstacle. It was a platform for the powerful defensive screen that tapped into the combination of aura projection and ritual magic used by the messengers.

Benella was unnerved by the ritual magic used by the messengers. Pallimustus had rituals and magical devices that created artificial auras, like aura beacons used for signalling. Compared to what the messengers could do, however, the Magic Society were children playing in the mud. Their ritual magic was able to not just produce artificial auras, but even take on and reproduce actual auras, as well as use them in more sophisticated ways.

The messengers could actively enhance protection arrays with their auras. This improved both offensive and defensive capabilities, and was the key to their success in fending off regular Adventure Society assaults. In addition to the walls around the stronghold, the circular buildings could each serve as a sturdy fort or bunker, depending on their size.

The buildings constructed by the messengers trended large, with a lot of open space. Columns rose from the top of the circular walls, creating a gap between the wall-tops and the conical roofs. The flying creatures often used this gap for entry and exit, although there were also arched double doors. Aside from that, smaller doors were used by servants of what the messengers called the 'lesser races.'

The messengers had a number of strongholds scattered to the west and south of Yaresh, all of which had come under attack multiple times. Each stronghold was made up of round buildings, surrounded by a neatly circular wall. In one such stronghold, Benella was waiting in a large round and almost empty building.

Inside the building were three chairs that would best be described as thrones, which were favoured by the messengers. The backs of the thrones curved in an hourglass shape to accommodate their wings. Benella knew that messengers could absorb their wings into their bodies, having seen them do it herself. They almost always did not, however, although she was unsure as to why.

Amongst the non-messengers like Benella, who had chosen to serve them, the best guess was that the messengers did not want to closely resemble celestines. There was little chance of that, even discounting the wings, as the messengers were around half again as tall as a celestine. Even so, the servants were careful to avoid even the implication. If a messenger thought they were being compared to their 'lessers,' any servant that did so would be annihilated, irrespective of their value.

In the community of servants, rumour and speculation would rapidly spread. This was because the messengers felt no need to explain themselves to those they considered lesser, which was everybody. Their inherent superiority was a key part of their quasi-religious philosophy, which Benella and the other servants tried their best to learn of, despite the messengers having no interest in teaching it.

Benella had found that the messengers' refusal to explain themselves in any instance and on any topic extended to the point of impracticality. All the servants had made mistakes due to a lack of information a messenger could easily have provided. The punishment for these unavoidable failures was always violent, often lethally so.

Benella had seen that the danger level differed from messenger to messenger. Since joining the stronghold full time, she had realised that the messenger she primarily served, Fal Vin Garath, was one of the more erratic. He was more prone to violence, and what exactly would set him off was less predictable, with most servants taking 'everything' as the default assumption.

The need to find a new place for herself was why she was waiting in the large building with the three thrones, which looked tiny in the high open space. The only other thing in the building, other than Benella herself, was a crystal recording projector on a small plinth.

She could no longer go back to Yareh, having been exposed by John Miller or, as she now realised, Jason Asano. She still maintained contact with certain people in the city, and while they were now laying low, she had managed to get the results of enquiries she had already made into John Miller. It took very little to discover Miller's true identity, as he was almost flaunting it. Between the scars, the skills and the team he was attached to, almost any investigation would quickly reveal the truth. Whether he realised it himself or not, Benella knew that Asano was aching to cut loose.

Benella's utility to the messengers as one of their agents inside the city was gone. Gathering information from overheard conversations in the cage fighting arena had only gotten her so far anyway. She had managed to dig out a few useful tidbits from attendees networking and making deals at the fights, but nothing wildly important or revelatory.

Her main value had been in managing Zolit. He would become increasingly unstable without her there to reinforce the right behaviour and administer doses, now that she could no longer return to the city. That problem was no longer hers, however, and the messengers would solve it as they saw fit. They certainly wouldn't bother telling her what was happening.

The presentation Benella was waiting to give was her chance to maintain relevancy to her winged masters. They had no sense of loyalty to those they considered lesser, so any accomplishments in the past had earned her almost nothing. At most, it demonstrated that she was still potentially useful moving forward. If she could show the messengers her value she would be assigned to a new role. If she did not, her best case was being an ordinary stronghold servant. They could easily decide she knew too much and eliminate her as a potential liability.

Benella's most recent results had been extremely patchy. Things had gone wrong from the moment she met Asano, and the key to her future was demonstrating that he was a significant threat. If she could convince the messengers that Asano was a threat they needed to deal with themselves, she would be absolved of blame. The advantage to the superiority with which the messengers viewed themselves was that their expectations were low. If they were required to handle an issue, then it logically followed that a servant was insufficient to the task. One thing the messengers never blamed their servants for was not being their equals.

The key person Benella need to impress was a messenger ritualist who was new to the stronghold, Jes Fin Kaal. She had been dispatched by messenger leadership and was referred to by the other messengers as Voice Kaal. From what Benella could tell, she was something between a general and a priest. How that worked with the messengers' religious philosophy she was unsure, as the only thing the messengers seemed to worship was themselves. What Benella did know was that if she could get the favour of Kaal, she might escape the capricious attentions of her current master, Fal.

In the face of insurmountable power, the only choice was to surrender to it or be crushed by it. Watching her adventuring team get annihilated one by one had engraved this onto Benella's soul. In the wake of that, she had betrayed her own kind and her own world to enter the dangerous servitude offered by the messengers.

Benella was utterly convinced that the conquest of her world was inevitable. If she wanted any place in it, then service to the new rulers was the key, and the earlier the better. Only one thing had ever given her any uneasiness in this conviction, and he was what had led her to her current position. She had come to believe that the messengers

were right about their superiority, but Jason Asano gave her much the same feeling they did. It left her uncertain about her choice, wondering if she had betrayed everything and everyone, only to be wrong.

Like Benella, the messengers were also seeing a shift in their circumstances. The arrival of Voice Kaal had led to speculation amongst the servants that the messengers were primed to escalate the conflicts they were involved in. Benella didn't know much, but was aware that at least some of the strongholds were fighting enemies that went beyond the adventurers of the city.

Three messengers flew into the building through the roof gap; two male messengers of silver rank, flanking a third who was shorter and had no aura that Benella could detect. The messenger on the left was Lord Fal, while the one on the right she had seen in the stronghold, but didn't know the name of. Messengers rarely deigned to introduce themselves to the servant races.

Compared to the fair-skinned, golden-haired Fal, the messenger on the right was dark-skinned, with silver hair and solid silver orbs for eyes. His wings were black, with white feathers along the bottom edge. His hair draped down his back in strings of tight braids.

Both men were shirtless, showing off lean muscle but an odd absence of nipples. Their lower bodies were covered by loose, flowing pants of dark teal with gold trim. Their feet were bare but didn't touch the ground, which was typical. The messengers frequently floated in the air rather than set foot on the ground. Their wings did not work like a bird's and they were levitating around using their auras.

Silver-rank essence users could levitate using their auras, and golds could float around in slow flight. Compared to what the messengers could manage, however, it was a pale imitation. Not only could messengers move faster and with more control, but they were not easily disrupted by almost any intervention.

Benella presumed the messenger in the middle was Jes Fin Kaal. She was smaller than the others, barely taller than seven feet, and she lacked the domineering presence of the other two. Benella couldn't magically detect her presence at all, despite Kaal being gold rank. All she sensed were the silver rankers beside her.

Kaal's clothing was also different, being a loose robe of deep red, with white trim that matched her pristine white wings. Only a few wisps of black hair escaped the hood, which shadowed her pale, delicate features. Compared to the solid gold and silver orbs that the other messengers had for eyes, Kaal had more human eyes, albeit supernaturally blue. They stood out in the shadowy hood even more than her bright red lips.

Despite the auras radiating from the two messengers beside her, Benella could not take her eyes from the woman in the middle. Her compelling presence did not seem aura related, although perhaps it was some subtle effect, beyond Benella's ability to recognise. Her thoughts drifted back to Asano, whose presence had been similarly mysterious.

The three thrones rose into the air for the messengers to sit on, which they did. Fal looked down on Benella imperiously, which was almost comfortingly normal.

"You have asked to present to us information of a particular threat," Fal told her. "You speak of the man whose familiar followed you to our meeting."

"Yes," Benella said, steeling her nerve. "I had already determined this man was suspicious, and suggested investigation. The decision was made to move directly to elimination, but he detected our approach and fled. I had already initiated an investigation of him on my own initiative at that point, so I was able to gather a good amount of information. Then I contacted Lord Fal, and made the grave error of allowing the man to follow me using a shadow familiar."

"We expect our servants to serve to the best of their ability, no more and no less," the dark-skinned messenger said. "There is no admonition required in a failure to notice a child of the Reaper."

Relief flooded Benella, but she was not fool enough to thank the messenger. The implication that her consideration would matter to him would get her punished and possibly killed outright.

"After collating the information on this man from my various sources," she continued, "It became evident that he poses a potential threat. I believe that further investigation is warranted, but in the wake of my failure, I am unable to do so. Due to the Adventure Society learning that I serve you, I cannot return to the city and my associates are either going into hiding, fleeing the city or have already been snatched up."

"And what of these contacts?" the dark-skinned messenger asked. "What would be your recommendation?"

"Leave them be," Benella said. "If I were an Adventure Society officer looking into this, I would be laying traps for when agents come to tie off loose ends, compromising us further. There is a reason that agents in the city are not given critical information."

Benella was under no impression that they were looking for actual advice. The question had been a test, which was good. It meant that they were genuinely considering Benella for a position of actual relevancy. She at least still had a chance to get out of the building alive, if she could convince them that Jason Asano was a genuine threat.



## Chapter 650

### Even Though You Fear

The round building was like a silo; wide, high and round, without any internal structures. Standing in the middle of it, next to a small crystal recording projector, Benella felt tiny. The three powerful beings looming over her, floating in the air on thrones did not help.

Benella had one chance to prove herself still valuable to the messengers. What she had gone with was presenting Jason Asano as a potential threat to the agenda of the messengers, which was a risky play. Her initial investigation into him had all stemmed from a chance encounter with him in an obviously fake guise, and an instinctive sense that he was dangerous. The more she dug up, however, the more her sense that he was a large problem grew, yet the messengers, as far as she knew, were unaware of him. She managed to hold her nerve as she explained everything she had found, advocating for further investigation into the man. Once she was done, she could only wait like a prisoner about to be sentenced.

Thus far, only the two silver-rank messengers had spoken. Fal Vin Garath was Benella's master, who was abusive but not outside the bounds of acceptability to his fellow messengers. He was free to treat the servant races however he pleased, so long as it did not impinge upon the interests of other messengers.

The other messenger she did not know, although she had seen him moving around the stronghold. He seemed to be of equal status to Fal, while being his physical and temperamental counterpart. Dark skinned and silver-haired, compared to Fal's fair complexion and golden hair, he was composed and civil in his conduct. This was true even to servants, although there was no question that he demanded nothing less than total obedience. But while his tone always carried an implicit warning when speaking to servants, Benella much preferred it to Fal's open threat.

The third messenger, dominant amongst the three, had yet to speak. Jes Fin Kaal had, thus far, allowed the others to ask the questions, although Fal had said little of use. It was the other messenger who seemed to be her primary representative. Fal was about to speak when Kaal made a silencing gesture. Then, for the first time since her arrival, she spoke.

"I am aware that your primary purpose in bringing this information to us is to prove your worth for self-serving reasons," she said, her voice an ominous melody. "This is acceptable, as your goal is to prove yourself a worthy servant. But of all the ways you

could have chosen to approach us, why did you choose this one? You could have brought any number of issues to us. Why is this the one that will show you are an asset to be valued, and not a liability to be excised?"

Benella didn't even consider denying her motivations.

"I..."

She frowned, hesitant. She knew that her next words would be life or death.

"In my ignorance," she said, "I do not know how to address you."

The standard mode of address for messengers was lord, be they men, women or androgynous. Benella was aware that Kaal was part of a select group within the messengers, and feared offending her.

"I am Voice Kaal, and you may address me as such."

Benella neither apologised nor thanked her, being worthy of neither. Fearing that she was subconsciously stalling for time, which Kaal would notice, she steeled her nerves again.

"This is the thing that matters," Benella said, her voice firming. "Yes, there were many ways to show my value. Many issues I could bring to your attention, but they did not warrant such an approach as this. The leadership amongst the servant races would have been sufficient to address them, and bringing them to you would have been a waste of your time. But this man is someone I suspect will be beyond the ability of the servant races to handle."

"Did you bring it to the servant leadership?"

"I did."

"They agreed with your assessment?"

"They agreed that I should present this issue to you personally, Voice Kaal."

It had taken significant insistence on Benella's part to address the potential threat of Asano. The leadership had many calls on their time and as events were escalating in the stronghold. They had not only refused to look into one silver-rank auxiliary adventurer, but would not even listen long enough to discover why. Benella understood as she was far from the only servant looking to advance themselves with 'important issues for the messengers.' She finally managed to convince someone to allow her to present her case. That way, she would be the one killed for wasting the messengers' time, being neither the first nor the last to meet their end that way.

What Benella was unsure of was why Kaal was so interested in Benella's thought process in reaching that point. Kaal's seat descended partway to the floor and she leaned forward, examining Benella. She could feel the messenger forcefully probing her emotions

with her aura. Could the Voice even read her thoughts? She had heard rumours from other servants, although nothing reliable.

“Why?” Kaal asked again. “Something very specific convinced you that this man should be brought to our attention. I can feel it digging at your insides like a burr. What is it? Why are you afraid of it? It’s not what you found when you looked into him, is it? It’s the thing that made you dig deeper in the first place. For all that you found to support your instinct, it was something at the beginning that convinced you. It drove you to bring it to us, even though you fear what doing so will mean for you.”

Chills ran through Benella's body as the messenger rendered her transparent, seeing through her thoughts and motivations. She bowed her head, knowing she had to answer the question she had fervently hoped would not be asked. It made sense that someone who could see through her like a window would dig it out. Squaring her shoulders, she continued.

“I told Lord Fal that I first gained this man’s attention when I noticed something about him. That the aura mask he gave me reacted unusually.”

“But there is more to it than that,” Kaal deduced, her voice certain. Benella nodded, still not meeting her eyes.

“I felt something from this man. Something like I have never felt from any of the servant races. I have only ever felt it from...”

Benella braced herself, squeezing her eyes closed.

“...from your kind. From messengers.”

Benella felt air wash over her, but nothing else. She opened her eyes to see the dark-skinned messenger's back in front of her, his wings spread out to shield her. Past him, she could see Lord Fal, arrested mid-lunge by a restraining hand on his chest. Fal still had a fist raised, ready to crash down on Benella.

“Return to your seat.”

“This creature just compared one of the lesser races to us,” Fal snarled.

“She was asked a question and answered it honestly,” Kaal said. “If she lied, would you have struck her down for that?”

“Of course.”

“And I am certain this woman knew you would. That she came here, knowing she would likely be asked that question, where both answers carried a death sentence. Yet she came. I will not allow you to kill what may be a surpassing servant. Not yet.”

“How can you tolerate her insolence?” Fal asked in a shout.

“However I see fit. Return to your seat, Fal Vin Garath. I will not tell you a third time.”

Fal openly glared at Kaal but obeyed as he did so, returning to his seat. The other messenger did as well.

“Thank you, Hess Jor Nasala,” Kaal said to him.

Benella was frozen as the two messengers floated back to their chairs. She was at least glad that she had found a name for the third messenger, although she still offered no thanks. He may have saved her life, but all he was safeguarding was her potential value. Her gratitude meant nothing to him.

Kaal rose from her seat, floating past the other as they returned to theirs. She stopped when she reached Benella, looming over her. Benella did not look up to meet her eyes.

“You are a gambler, elf. You have bet your life on the suspicion that this man you have told us of is of sufficient value that we need to investigate, if not intervene ourselves. That you did not take a safer approach to secure a place in our service interests me. What about this man has so shaken you?”

“I know my power to assess is lacking,” Benella said. “I know he is not the match of the gold rankers arrayed against you. But of all the adventurers I’ve ever encountered, this man is the only one my instincts told me was like you. The messengers.”

“Like us?” Fal roared standing up in his seat. “You would compare—”

“Quiet,” Kaal said, her voice soft but with an almost physical power behind it. Fal complied in an instant, sitting back down, although he continued to glower.

“Explain,” Kaal commanded Benella. “How is he like us?”

“I’m not sure exactly how to explain it,” she said. “There is an otherworldliness to him. Beyond anything I’ve felt even from Zolit. Oh, Zolit is—”

“I am familiar with the Zolit project,” Kaal cut her off. “Continue.”

“I’m not sure quite how to say it.”

“Yes you are,” Kaal told her. “You simply fear what will happen when you do.”

Benella nodded her admission.

“This man feels on a level with your kind that goes beyond rank,” she said. “I spoke of otherworldliness, but it was not like what I had felt from other messengers. It’s like he has the same thing that makes you special but...”

Her voice broke, knowing she could well be about to die.

“...even more so.”

“She thinks some lesser being is—”

He was cut off as Kaal turned to look at him and his mouth sealed over, like a wound healing over.

“I have taken your power to speak,” Voice Kaal told him. “What I have left you with is the power to think and the power act. In the future, use them in that order. If I become convinced that your mouth can produce anything worthwhile, I shall return it to you. Until then, I suggest you study the value of silence.”

That her abusive master had been admonished and punished did not make Benella feel better. Fal no longer had a mouth, but the glare in his eyes spoke loudly. He was not happy about being chastised over one of the lesser races, and in front of her, no less. The idea of being shamed in the face of an inferior poured through his eyes as rage, although he was not fool enough to suppress her with his aura. For the moment, the presence of Kaal was keeping Benella safe, but she knew that should she ever be in his power again, she would die. He wouldn't even need an excuse, given her status. If a messenger wanted her dead, it was his right to kill her.

That put all of Benella's hopes on Kaal. She was not only of higher rank than the other messengers in the room but was able to control the very nature of their bodies. She had been the one to erase the mouth from Fal's face. If Benella could become the property of Kaal, Fal could not touch her without cause.

Done with Fal, Kaal turned to the terrified Benella and crouched down, as if approaching a skittish animal. Even so, the robe that was low enough to hide her feet never quite reached low enough to brush the floor.

“You said this man is like us, but more?” Kaal asked softly.

Benella nodded.

“You believe this man is a threat to us.”

“Potentially. I would not presume to equal your judgement, and merely wish to point out that he is out there.”

“And you have seen in him the same thing you see in us?”

“Not exactly,” Benella said. “But there is something there. My instincts screamed at me that he...”

Benella trailed out, having realised what she was about to say before she stopped herself.

“That he what?” Kaal demanded.

“...that he was on the same level as you. Your people, I mean, not you specifically.”

Benella waited for the death blow, but it never came. Then she felt Kaal's presence with her magical senses for the first time. They had been extended gently and she realised it was for her benefit. Despite that gentleness, however, there was an unflinching

imperiousness to it. It was also something different in her aura, compared to the other messengers; a thread of power whose source seemed distant and endless.

“What do you feel?” Kaal asked.

“It's closer to what I felt from Asano,” Benella said. “Not the same, though. It feels like the power inside you is anchored somewhere else, while his... It's as if you possess power, while he *is* power.”

Kaal's eyes widen for just a fleeting moment. Benella would have missed it if Kaal had not been crouched down in front of her. The messenger floated back to her throne and sat down between Fal and Hess.

“You brought this man to our attention, seeking to rise within our servant hierarchy.”

“Yes, Voice Kaal,” she said.

“You had best tend your garden with caution, child. A misstep could see everything you have grown pulled up by the roots and burned to ash.”

Benella wordlessly acknowledged Kaal's guiding words with a nod. She tried to avoid getting excited, realising that she had accomplished her goal. She knew the messengers would sense her relief and joy, and thought for a moment that she saw the tiniest smile tease the corners of Kaal's lips, then told herself she was imagining it.

“Tell us about this man,” she instructed Benella.

Benella gave a jerky nod, her whole body trembling.

“He is travelling under the identity of John Miller,” she said. “He is ostensibly the cook of a team of travelling adventurers. This is an obvious falsehood, as even the short time I had to investigate was sufficient to reveal his true identity. His real name is Jason Asano, an adventurer belonging to that same team to which he is ostensibly an auxiliary. The purpose of the false identity, given its transparency, seems to be to garner less attention after the events in Rimaros surrounding him. It is not a complex identity designed for infiltration.”

She tried to calm herself by keeping her hands busy, giving her attention to the crystal recording projector.

“It was difficult to obtain imagery of Asano, especially on short notice. I did manage to obtain one recording with his appearance, which matches the man I encountered. This is all I could get, as he has an item or ability that interferes with recordings unless he allows them.”

She finished calibrating the projector and pulled out a crystal.

“What I have here is something he did allow, from a meeting that is believed to have been held out in the open for the very purpose of being observed. He is meeting with two

people, both believed to be diamond rankers from outside of this world. One arrived and was taken away later by a third entity. The other spent some time in Rimaros and is believed to be close to Asano. I do not know her identity, but I heard reports that Soramir Rimaros was deferent towards her. Soramir Rimaros is a diamond ranker, and officially, has taken Asano out into the cosmos. This was when I became certain it was right to bring Asano to your attention.”

“When I asked you why you brought this to me,” Kaal said. “Surely this would have been reason enough to offer me, rather than risk angering us.”

Benella clenched her hand in a determined fist before turning from the projector she was setting up to look at Kaal.

“You did not ask for a reason I decided to bring this to you, Voice Kaal. You asked for *the* reason. If I had told you this was it, it would have been a lie.”

Kaal gave a slight nod that Benella would have interpreted as approval if she hadn't known better. Benella slotted the crystal into the projector and an image came up.

“Stop!” Kaal commanded immediately. A startled Benella was only frozen for a moment before she paused the recording. Kaal floated out of her chair to peer closely at the now-still projection.

“You were quite right that this warrants further examination,” Kaal said. “You have done well.”

“What is it?” Fal asked.

Hess Jord Nasala moved closer, also examining the paused projection. It showed Jason, Dawn and Shako sitting in chairs on the lawn in front of Jason's cloud house in Rimaros.

“Who are those people?” Hess asked.

“This will be Asano,” Kaal said, pointing to Jason. “The others are the now-former prime vessels for the World-Phoenix and Zithis Carrow Vayel.”

The other two messengers stirred.

“Why would they be here?” Hess asked. “Are they interfering in our affairs?”

“I doubt directly,” Kaal said. “The great astral beings are more concerned with one another than us, although we cannot be certain when Vayel is involved.”

“We cannot base our activities on doubts and assumptions,” Hess said. “We should investigate this matter further.”

“Agreed,” Kaal said, “but the timing is poor. We are too close to the next stage. Once the assault of Yaresh begins, we can seek this man Asano out more actively.”