

## Chapter 695

### No

The bunker beneath the entertainment district was set up as a series of dormitories, punctuated by various service rooms. As the occupants were primarily not essence users, there was a need for food preparation and toilet facilities for thousands. Those facilities, in turn, required logistics and utility infrastructure to service them.

Jason, Tera Jun Casta and a confused summoned monster crashed through the ceiling and into a warehouse filled with massive crates and barrels. They hit a rack hard on their way down, sending several crates tumbling to the floor. The crates broke open and spewed out compressed rations, more than the crates should have been able to hold. Cheap but mediocre dimensional magic had been used to increase storage space, but that magic broke along with the crates, depositing the contents onto the floor.

Jason and Tera were both bloodied, having finally fought hard enough to overcome each other's inherent toughness and rapid healing. Jason's sword was back outside, having been dropped when Tera rammed them both into the pit. She had already dropped her axes and lost one of her gauntlets during their descent. The other had lost one of its serrated arm blades, but it was now the only weapon that either of them had.

Alarms were blaring at their intrusion and, as they got to their feet, a pair of silver-rank adventurers burst through the warehouse doors, a squad of bronze-rankers behind them. One of the silver-rankers dove at Tera and was hurled into the wall hard enough to leave cracks for his trouble. The other fired a stream of frigid wind, laden with icicles at Jason. Jason turned to look at the man as the beam stopped dead around arm's length away.

"I know I'm in rough condition," Jason understated, "but of the three intruders, one has wings and another is a monster. You can't figure out which one is the adventurer?"

Tera looked at Jason and then at the door, making her choice and bolting for it, past the adventurer picking himself up off the floor. The bronze-rankers split like bowling pins as she barrelled through.

"Deal with the monster, then seal and barricade the room," Jason commanded the silver ranker. "I'll handle her."

Jason had no aura to back up his words, yet the man who had just attacked him found himself moving to obey. There was something in Jason's voice that dared him to disobey, and he was not taking that dare. He was not an expert fighter, which was why

he'd been assigned to the bunker. He wouldn't be missed in the battle above, and if the bunker was breached, it was unlikely to matter how strong the on-station defenders were.

Jason swiftly pursued Tera, following a trail of silver-gold blood. He moved through a short series of utility corridors until he found her shoving open a pair of double doors. They looked heavy and were doubtless magically reinforced, but the people behind them had failed to close them in time. She shoved the unlatched doors wide, scattering the people on the other side before dashing inside.

Jason pursued her into a massive dormitory that held hundreds of people. Rows of bunks filled the far end while closer to the door, cafeteria-style tables were lined with people. Tera glanced back at Jason and he saw the fire in her eyes had dimmed. She was no longer willing to face him, even if she did have the only weapon.

He would have let her live if he could, but she had taken that option from him. He didn't know whether her power would release or slay them if it expired before one of them killed the other. He wouldn't trust her word on it, and he wasn't willing to wait when monsters would soon be pouring into the shelter through the hole.

He watched Tera look from him to the people who were scrambling to move away from them, climbing over tables and each other to head for the bunk end of the massive room. He realised that she wasn't seeing people fleeing for their lives; she was seeing hostages. They were her path to evening the odds, making up for her lost confidence.

She would be able to get to the closest people before he could get to her, and they both knew it. Even if he did reach her first, the fight would come with collateral damage, and quite likely a lot of it. When she moved in their direction, Jason knew that there was little point in chasing. All he could do was try and talk her down, but the idea of civilian casualties he was helpless to stop was clouding his mind. Images of people dying in Broken Hill and Makassar because he wasn't strong enough flashed through his mind.

"Don't. You." **DARE.**

He didn't even speak the last word, which vibrated through the air on a wave of aura. Tera stopped dead, jolted in shock. She stared at Jason, who was equally surprised. What he just did shouldn't have been possible, his power sealed by her duelling ability.

They stared at each other as Jason's mind raced through the possible explanations, rejecting all but one. His astral realm wasn't just a place he could go, a place that belonged to him. It was him; it was his soul. And just like a messenger, his soul was his body. One being's power might suppress his own, but it could not suppress his entire astral realm. That power was far too great, and now he knew there was a way to tap into it.

He examined the sensations shooting through him, but it was hard to pick out any unusual sensations through all the damage. He managed to pick out an odd tremulation, his body quivering ever so slightly in reaction to a power that had just surged through it. It was a similar sensation to overcharging his portal ability with energy from his astral gate.

“How?” Tera asked breathlessly.

For once, Jason did not respond with a pithy line. He was concentrating on how he could actively tap into that power, replicating what he had done unconsciously in a rage. He knew he couldn't call up a portal to his astral realm to draw power through. He had tried that while stalling for time with banter at the beginning of the fight. But he was his astral realm. Did he even need one? Could he *be* the portal? Not to travel through, but to tap into his full reserve of power.

He saw the shock fading from Tera's face and she was eyeing the civilians again. They had managed to flee further down the room while Jason and Tera stared at each other, but it wouldn't stop them from getting caught up in it if the fight continued. He didn't have time for careful experimentation, to see if he could do the thing that popped into his mind without harming himself. That was nothing new. Concentrating on the feeling he had when he'd spoken out in anger, he reached inside to draw out power in a way unlike any he had attempted before.

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Tera's attention was arrested again as she felt Jason's aura brush against her, faint but unmistakable. She told herself it shouldn't be possible, and not for the first time in the last few moments. She felt it surge again, just like when it had flooded the city. Once again she felt the rage as the aura towered over her, diminishing everything she was and belittling her ambitions. Just as it had the first time, fury rose within her.

From the day she was brought into being and her training began, she had been told that she was the pinnacle of creation; a living embodiment of the will of the cosmos. That nothing, save for her own kind, was her equal. She was power and glory manifest.

She was shown the path that would lead her to stand at the top, even amongst the messengers. To become an astral king. The path was known, but it was rigid and hard. Only a messenger could walk it.

In eighteen years, not a single day went by where she doubted her path for a moment. She met every challenge and accomplished every feat presented to her. She would reach gold and then diamond, and then become the pinnacle of her kind that, in turn, was the pinnacle of all kinds.

Then came Asano. He was no messenger, yet everything that made her special, she could feel within him. The body-spirit gestalt. The aura that could seize physical reality, even stronger than her own. Most of all, he wasn't struggling to climb the tower to astral monarchy; he was inside it, walking up easy stairs at his leisure. He was incomplete, but unmistakably an astral king.

It was perversion. Heresy. The only path to astral king was a messenger transcending diamond-rank. It made a lie of everything she knew. Everything she had been told, every single day of her life. Most of all, it made her feel small. Lesser. How could she be the pinnacle of creation with this abomination roaming the cosmos, making a mockery of who and what she was? And it wasn't just an astral king, either. She didn't recognise exactly the other elements of his aura, but at the very least she felt the echo of divinity. Was he on a path that went beyond even astral king? If such a person could exist, a supremacy that she could never reach, then not only was she not superior, but she never could be. If so, then what meaning was there in her own experience?

The fear and doubt that had plagued her were gone. She did not need hostages or weapons. All she needed was Asano's ruined corpse beneath her feet, dissolving into rainbow smoke. His existence must come to an end. She was poised to launch herself at him when her entire universe became pain.

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Jason had known from the start that this fight would be bad. He had, for all intents, been pushed into a death match with a teenager, born and raised in a cult. Like any cult, the doctrine seemed transparently foolish from the outside, the ideology crumbling at the first sign of critical thought. Their superiority obsession was clearly nonsensical, falling apart when contrasted with almost any information not sourced from their own insular community.

But to those born and raised in a cult, or who had found something in it that filled a deep need, the incongruities didn't matter. They had been primed from the beginning to ignore the lies of outsiders, however compelling they might seem. But when they were forced to confront those problems, they did not rationally accept what the outsiders saw as logical, self-evident conclusions. They got angry and they got violent.

Tera's power made it kill or be killed. One of them would die; there was no room for mercy. But, like anyone, Jason did not like being forced into corners where every choice was bad. He had become so tired as he kept falling short on Earth, stuck between bad and worse decisions. He had been faced with one hard choice after another as the people that should have been helping stood in his way.

The Network betrayed him over and over again, but he kept working with them because that was what it took. He failed the living as the victims piled high in Makassar, then had to destroy what was left when the bodies were turned into unliving monstrosities. He had to make deals with the very enemies behind those previous events, all the while planning to turn on them. In doing so, he became that which he hated most: a betrayer of trust.

He was improved from what he had become at that time. Not recovered, not entirely; there was no going back to what he was before, but he was able to live with himself again. Mended enough that he could put the hard choices of the past behind him, even if they would always be there. But now, once again, he was faced with a bleak proposition: Kill a woman – a girl – that he saw as a victim. It wasn't even really an option, as the alternative was to die.

No.

The refusal was a declaration, not just to himself but to the universe. He wasn't going to let it happen. Yes, this girl was an enemy. Yes, she had probably killed countless innocent people. Yes, many were more worthy of being saved than her. But here and now, he was done. The world had bent him to the point of breaking and it was trying to bend him again. It wanted him to kill this girl, but he was going to give her mercy. This time, the world was going to bend.

Jason's spiritual battle against the Builder was something he remembered not with his mind, but with his soul. His body had not been his own and it had been a spiritual war, in any case. One that a mind seated in the physical matter of a brain was inherently incapable of comprehending. But Jason was not the same man that warred with the Builder over his soul at iron-rank. He didn't even have a brain anymore, and his soul was not just a spiritual entity lurking behind his body. His soul and his body were one.

Jason still didn't remember much of what happened, like hearing echoes from the other end of a long tunnel. The memories were emotion more than anything; fear, resolve. A seemingly limitless will that screamed for him to capitulate with the force of a typhoon. Colin, joining him in the last stand for his soul. Defiance.

The one thing he had come to fully remember was a sensation. The Builder had not been able to harm his soul, but he could inflict a pain that transcended anything a physical body could experience. Jason's own spiritual attack was a paltry echo of that, something he had learned from that scathing sensation, barely remembered as it was.

The Builder had scoured Jason's soul, trying to force him to open it up and accept his oppressor. Jason had not. And now he fully remembered that pain; exactly what the Builder had done to him, and how. He had resolved to never use it. It was not something to

inflict even on an enemy. He had thus far drawn the line at far less savage soul attacks, even if sometimes he had needed a friend to help him not cross the line.

But that was not enough for what he needed to do now. He had to become like the Builder and inflict a suffering he had promised himself he never would. He wondered what Shade would say, but he only had himself in that moment, his own judgement. Judgement that had failed him before. He could feel his familiars inside, locked away and unable to advise him as he crossed a line he had resolved not to.

He could only tell himself that while he was replicating the Builder's actions, it was with the opposite of the Builder's intentions. That it was the only path to mercy. Was it a justification? He knew that, whatever he told himself, he had a hunger for power and control. The god Dominion had seen it from the beginning.

In the end, all he could do was the best he could with what he had. And what he had was a girl whose soul had trapped them both and would not let go until one of them was dead. She couldn't even end it now if she wanted to or she would have, he was certain. So he had to reach inside her soul and end it for her. But first, she had to let him in.

The only way he could shut off her power was to force his way into her soul and do it himself. He couldn't break in, any more than the Builder could with him. She had to let him, and there was no way she trusted him enough to allow that, whatever the circumstances. Sometimes, even when the mind said yes, the soul said no.

He would have to do what the Builder did to him. Make her suffer, as he had, until she capitulated. *If* she capitulated. And even then, he couldn't be sure it would work. He had never rummaged around someone else's soul.

He could just kill her. He knew what he was about to do and that, in the face of such miserable suffering, killing could be seen as a mercy in itself. But Jason wouldn't allow it. Fate had put this girl in his path and decreed that one of them would die. Fate could go fuck itself.

Transcendent light of blue, silver and gold started shining through Jason's skin as he lit up like a beacon. He drew on the power of his astral realm, his body shaking as he turned himself into something like a portal that only his power could pass through. It clashed with Tera's soul, the very thing that was binding him. This meant he didn't need to push through the suppression to attack it; it was right there waiting for him.

Tera fell but didn't hit the ground, instead floating up. Her spine arched and her wings, head and limbs were all yanked in the direction of the ground as if something was holding them while brutally pushing into her back. Her mouth opened in the image of a

scream, but at first, none came. Then there was a sonorous hum, building with every passing second, slowly rising in pitch as it grew louder.

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Emresh Vohl was huddled with the civilians, despite his silver-rank. The adventurers had tried to recruit him in case of something breaking into the bunker, but he had refused them to their derision. But he was no adventurer, having ranked up on cores. He'd never fought anything more dangerous than a stablehand a rank lower than he was.

His choice has been validated when the ragged angel had barged into the room, battered and bleeding. The bronze-rankers trying to close the door on her had been thrown back as she shoved it open and stormed in, dripping silver-gold blood.

He knew that she was one of the messengers that people had been talking about, not an angel from the old elvish stories his mother told him as a child. But even as injured as she was, she still looked like one. There was something glorious about her, even under the blood, the wounds and the tattered armour.

The man that followed her was no such thing. He was all but naked, the blood painting his body covering him more than his red-stained under-shorts. He was in even worse condition, his body covered in savage lacerations.

Emreth had not wasted time using his silver-rank physicality to rush past others, not caring if a few children or old people were knocked aside. But he kept his gaze on the two figures, and he did not like the way the messenger looked at them. He'd seen that look on his father many times; the look of a man who saw assets and not people. It was not something he'd ever had a problem with until he was the asset.

The two intruders had a short exchange, him warning her in a voice that rang like a gong. She looked at him in shock and he seemed equally surprised. For a long moment, they just stared at one another. Then he started to glow and she was dragged into the air by an unseen force, her arms, legs and wings pulled downwards as if trying to drag her back.

The room was eerily quiet, civilians and bronze-rank adventurers equally huddled in silence as they looked on. Then came a base hum, slowly growing louder and higher until people started to moan and Emreth felt a pricking in his ears and eyes. A child cried as the rising pitch of the hum left blood trickling from her ear, more joining her as blood started seeping from the eyes, noses and ears of the young and the elderly. Then an aura washed over them, domineering yet protective; the authority of a benevolent dictator.

The sound stopped affecting the civilians, who looked on at the suffering angel and glowing man who was also starting to float into the air. Dark red leather started appearing

on his body, draping him in a robe. It soaked away the blood left on his exposed hands and face. When his face cleared, Emreth's blood ran cold.

Silver-rankers had excellent memories. Emreth knew that face, even if the dark brown eyes were now an alien blue-orange. He had last seen it on the floor of a tavern, shielded by the man's arms as Emreth and his boys kicked the man over and over.

Things started clicking into place. The mysterious person who had severely damaged his father's business interests, for some unknown slight. The way the man had taunted Emreth, all but asking for a beating. Emreth had gone to the tavern looking to beat someone and he now realised the man had offered himself up because he could take it.

He watched as the man's face vanished into a dark hood as a cloak that was not fabric but a living void manifested around him. He could just make out the silhouette of the man's sharp chin, beneath the glowing eyes.

Essence users rarely exhibited the base physiological functions of a normal body. They hardly ever blushed, hardly ever cried and never went to the toilet. Especially by silver-rank, only extremes of emotion could make their magical bodies replicate the base nature they had left behind. This left Emreth confused at the warm trickle he felt in his pants.

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The most infinitesimal portion of power the Builder could exert would still be enough to annihilate a universe. Jason couldn't comprehend power on that scale, let alone match it. Yet, even at his power level, his facsimile of the Builder's assault on his soul was a horrifying thing to do to a person. Jason himself knew this better than anyone, and as he flayed Tera's soul, he felt an intense revulsion he had to push through to keep going.

It was the only potential path out that he saw leading anywhere but to her death, but he wondered again if death was not the greater mercy. He knew what the treatment he was giving her would do. It had taken him months and some of the best experts in the world to recover. He doubted the messengers would give her the same care that he had received.

He kept pouring on the pain, willing her to surrender. The faster she let him in, the quicker the pain would end, and if she didn't surrender at all, he would have to kill her anyway. Then, instead of mercy, he had taken her from death to excruciatingly miserable death. He had to steel his resolve over and over to continue, redoubling his efforts as his will squeezed her soul like a ball in his fist.

Jason didn't have a star seed, but he wasn't looking to take her over once he was allowed into her soul. All he needed was a connection, and in the course of his torturing



her, he realised that it was already there. He could feel a link, not between Jason Asano and Tera Jun Casta but between astral king and messenger. He could tell immediately that it had always been there, waiting. It was strange and made him feel uncomfortable. It was almost like messengers were built to be controlled.

Jason poured his will into that connection, every ounce of soul strength he could muster assaulting her anew. Finally, he felt the first, tiny tremble in her will to resist. Whatever that connection was, it left her hard-wired to obey, so long as he could activate it. That she was able to resist the inherent urge to surrender that came through it deeply impressed Jason, even if he wished she didn't. He desperately wanted to stop, although not near as much as she did, he knew.

He had to finish it. He had to push through, and make her give up. He floated over to her, his cloak drifting loosely around him. He had pushed away the power of her soul enough that he could use at least some of his powers. He reached out a hand, palm down in the space where her torso was arched up.

**Yield. Your. Soul.**

Her body trembled, then shook. Then she fell to the ground.