

## Chapter 686

### Win a Fight

Fal Vin Garath was not having a good day. He detested being forced to act at the behest of the Voice of the Will, Jes Fin Kaal, and this mission was exactly why. She had sent him to kill Jason Asano, but she clearly expected him to not come back. He would relish the look on her face when he dropped Asano's head at her feet.

Fal could not openly defy the voice. Like all messengers, he needed to be sworn to an astral king, lest he wither and die. It was one of the strongest drives to become an astral king, as only then could they truly stand with no one and nothing above them. Until then, the astral king had influence not just over his actions but his very being. And as a voice of the astral king's will, Jes Fin Kaal shared that influence.

Having his mouth sealed closed was a humiliation, especially when it did not even come from the king herself but one of her voices. Fal was at the start of his journey, still silver rank, but he already had a long list. When he stood at the peak, everyone on that list would pay.

For now, however, Fal was stuck obeying the voice of the astral king to whom he was sworn. He was unable to defy her voice, but that did not mean he could not undermine Jes Fina Kaal. She had plans for the outworlder and saw Fal as meat she could feed to him. But Fal would be the one to feed, and Kaal's intentions for Asano would die with him.

The first step was finding the man inside the city. He was quite elusive and the city was in chaos, making an individual aura almost impossible to pick out. Unless he forcibly manifested his aura on a large scale, which would be insane in this circumstance, Fal would have to hunt him down.

That meant starting with the most likely place to find him and then torturing answers out of the people there. Either Asano would be drawn in or he would get information that drew him closer. The best information the messengers had was that Asano and his team were based out of a large adventuring vehicle, located alongside those of the other foreign adventurers.

Fal went through the breach closest to the area. There was a large zone of eclectic vehicles, many of which were the size of buildings. It amounted to a city district comprised of mobile forts, centred around a sprawling refugee camp. The camp had been emptied, leaving no one behind and there were no defenders out in the open. He could sense adventurers inside the vehicles, most of which were unable to block his aura senses.

Either the district had minimal defenders or they were gathered in the vehicles that could block his perception.

The leader of the contingent to which Fal had been attached started issuing orders as soon as they were through the barrier.

“Watch out for countermeasures from the adventurer vehicles. Eliminate any that are impacting the monsters, but watch out for ambushes. They may have greater numbers than we can sense.”

Monsters had poured through the breach before any of the messengers, to absorb any ambushes and reveal emplaced defences. This proved wise as the defenders remained in their mobile forts, letting the vehicle weapons do the work. With the larger vehicles especially, they boasted heavy-duty weapons that could eliminate a silver-rank monster with a well-placed shot, and make a gold-ranker take notice.

Vehicle weapons were not designed to take out people or smaller monsters, however, which is why adventurers only used vehicles when hunting large monsters. Only the fact that the monsters were an unmissable curtain made hunkering down in the vehicles a viable strategy. The messengers, once they made their appearance, had little trouble avoiding the vehicles' weapons, at least for the most part. Several vehicles had more pinpoint weaponry, especially the two that were not, currently, vehicles.

Although they both completely block magical perception, the two buildings were plainly cloud constructs currently configured as buildings. And those buildings were configured for war. The messengers were appropriately wary of the two buildings, as cloud flasks were the tools of the most well-resourced adventurers. There was no telling what manner of weapons and defences they had been equipped with.

One of the buildings was gold-rank and the other silver. The gold-rank one was a dome with five heavily leaning towers jutting out. The towers themselves were capped with domes that blasted out various attacks. There were explosive fireballs and armour-piercing ballista bolts that were conjured already in flight. The most common attack was a chain lightning that hopped between monsters, eradicating one with each jump. The gold-rank attacks of a giant magical fortress were too much for silver-rank monsters.

The various attacks also had the accuracy to strike out at messengers, especially the lightning blasts. Unlike the summoned monsters, however, the messengers had exotic powers and intelligence. They used magical barriers, conjured armour and used the summons as living shields, meaning that while messengers certainly took hits, they weren't slaughtered like their summons.

The other building was a pyramid with a cup instead of a peak. Over the cup floated a massive, ominous eye. The sides of the pyramid were covered in matte-black hexagonal panels set into cloud-substance underneath. The cloud-stuff shone blue and orange in the seams between the dark hex panels.

Like the gold-rank cloud building, the pyramid had not just attacks but ones that could effectively target messengers. Some of the hexes withdrew, sinking into the cloud-stuff behind them. Rising in their place were complex arrangements of metal set into the surface of the cloud-material like eye-shaped mosaics. The eyes contained components of blue, orange and black metal, but each was dominated by a single colour. There was one eye of each colour set into each side of the pyramid, firing beams of different coloured energy.

Fal recognised that the design of the eye weapons was not native to this world, using elements of techno-magic it had yet to develop. The beam fired by each eye-weapon corresponded to the main colour of that eye. They fired in quick succession, the efficient downtime a result of combining magic and technology to create something better than either could alone.

This alone made it plain that the pyramid belonged to the outworlder, Asano, although that was hardly necessary. While the other cloud construct had a detectable aura from being soul-bound to an essence user, the pyramid used its aura as a weapon. It blanket the entire city district, amplified strongly enough that the gold-rankers' attempts to suppress it fell short. They perhaps could have managed it if that was all they did, but they needed to fight.

What the aura did was make any monster or messenger that made an attack suffer a retaliatory affliction. That affliction didn't do anything by itself, but despite its rarity, Fal knew of it and the danger it presented. The affliction was called Sin, and what it did was escalate any necrotic damage suffered. It was a rare affliction known to be employed heavily by Jason Asano.

One of the three beam colours, black, directly delivered necrotic damage to take advantage of the affliction. This was less effective against those with potent armour or magical barriers, but that was where the other beams came in. The orange ones were resonating-force, rapidly breaking down physical armour, while the blue disruptive-force beams had a similar effect against magical barriers.

The beams all ignored the monsters to target the messengers, although they mostly struck monsters anyway. There were just too many of them, and the messengers quickly learned to interpose a solid wall of monsters between themselves and the pyramid. For

this reason, the extra power and unpredictable lighting arcs made the gold-rank building the greater threat.

While the beams attacked the messengers, the giant eye above the pyramid was the most effective weapon for eliminating monsters in the district. Its gaze took the form of a massive beam that grew wider the further it projected. The beam itself was barely visible, a heat-haze shimmer tinted faintly blue. The results were likewise subtle, with no immediate impact. What it did was bestow afflictions, what Fal suspected to be the ones in Asano's own repertoire.

The messengers were able to easily avoid the eye's gaze, but it affected the monsters in droves. After the eye's gaze had moved on, the monsters left behind were soon melting in the sky, gobbets of wet flesh rotting away to fall like raindrops. Even with the lack of empathy quintessential to messengers, it was a horrifying sight. The information they had on Asano suggested a foolish hero complex, but this was not the power of a hero. It wasn't even the power of a villain. As dead flesh rained across the entire city district, it felt like the punishment of a vengeful god.

Fal scoffed at his own thought. Messengers were not afraid of gods and Asano was not one in any case, even if his pyramid felt like a temple. Despite its bizarre power, he knew the building could not project Asano's aura without Asano being present, meaning he had found his target. A soul-bound item lacked a strong enough connection to the soul to be a source of the true aura being projected by the building. Asano had to be inside, using the building to amplify his power.

The messengers continued to throw their summons at the vehicles below, cannon fodder they were happy to let die. While the defenders had not yet been forced to emerge, their weapons proving so successful, the situation could only be sustained for so long. Most weapons on adventurer vehicles were designed to fend off the odd monster attack and make the occasional hunt. They were not built for war and the sustained fire they were currently pumping out. Whether their power supplies ran low or the weapons were overtaxed and shut down, they would only last so long.

Fal guessed there would be a few exceptions, almost certainly including the two cloud buildings, But inevitably, most of the vehicles would stop firing before the summoned monsters stopped coming. Then the defenders would show themselves, and things would go badly for them. This particular attack force included a higher proportion of gold-rankers than normal, so they could reliably break into the vehicles once they were exposed.

Fal had his own mission that only required cracking open one of the vehicles. He sought out the gold-rank commander of the messenger forces.

“We need to invade the pyramid,” Fal told him. “The outworlder, Jason Asano, is in there. The Voice of the Will wants—”

“I agree,” the commander said, cutting him off. Fal had been expecting more of an argument.

“The voice made it clear that Asano is the priority in this zone,” the commander continued. “My orders are to facilitate a confrontation between you and Asano where you can use your isolation power to duel him. Even if they weren’t, that pyramid is a problem. It isn’t as much of a threat to ourselves as the gold-rank cloud building, but it’s killing the summons far too quickly. I want it dealt with before the adventurers are forced to come out and face us, so we have as much fodder as possible.”

“You’ll gather the gold-rankers for an attack, then?” Fal asked. The higher percentage of gold-rankers reflected Jes Fin Kaal’s priorities.

“My information is that Asano is arrogant and likes to make public demonstrations. You may be able to lure him from the building for a duel. If you kill him, his building will be greatly diminished, perhaps even going dormant entirely. If he kills you, we will catch him outside the building if we can and chase him into it if we can’t.”

The commander was testing his nerve. It was clear enough that the man was one of the voice’s lackeys, which was shameful for a gold-ranker. His job involved making sure that Fal did as instructed. Fal didn’t care, as he only had to do one thing to spite the commander and the foul woman he served: win a fight.

## Chapter 687

### King of the Sky

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

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

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

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

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

“JASON ASANO. COME OUT AND FACE ME!”

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

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

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

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

“Are you going to do it?”

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

Jason looked off into the middle distance.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You just ranked up to silver?"

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

"Who are you? Where is Jason Asano?"

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

"You're lying."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fal frowned.

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

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

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

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

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

## Chapter 688

### A Pretty Creepy Dude

Taika had both hands against the shower wall as the water sluiced the ichor from his trembling body. Nothing short of crystal wash would get the foul, clinging gunk the body produced during a rank-up off, but that was fine. The cloud palace showers had the water infused with crystal wash. Jason was surprisingly free with the stuff, given how there had been a shortage in Rimaros.

“Oh,” Taika said to himself, suddenly realising why.

He scrubbed away the foul black-green residue with a cloth that he was going to dispose of, crystal wash or no. He knew he shouldn't go straight out and fight, but he was going to anyway, the moment he stopped looking like a swamp monster. His body was still strained from the rank-up and what he needed was sleep. But that was not going to happen with a war raging outside.

Jason also knew that Taika shouldn't fight. He had told him as much, but also knew that his friend would not be deterred. Or so he thought. His body had mostly stopped shaking by the time he emerged from the shower to find, instead of his fresh clothes, Shade.

“You forgot a change of clothes, Mr Williams.”

“I did not forget a change of clothes.”

“I suspect that Mr Asano forgot for you,” Shade said, his tone soaked in disapproval. “This building tends to eat things he wants to disappear. He has, however, provided you with what he declared to be an appropriate outfit.”

Taika looked at the purple stretch pants that Shade held out for him.

“Seriously?”

“I can assure you of my firm protestation, Mr Williams. But you know how he gets.”

Taika chuckled, took the pants, slid them on and tied off the waist cord.

“Yeah, I know. Good looking out, bro.”

“Now that you are fully attired,” Shade said inaccurately, “Mr Asano has something he would like you to handle, Mr Williams.”

“He doesn't want me to fight.”

“He does not.”

“I managed to rank up in time, and I won't be fobbed off. Unless what he has for me is a fight, I'm not interested.”

“Which he anticipated. This task is, indeed, a fight.”

“What kind of fight?”

“I mentioned that this building tends to eat things that Mr Asano does not like. There is a messenger floating around who fits that description.”

“He wants my first fight after ranking-up to be a messenger?”

“Yes. I would add that I do not care for this particular messenger either.”

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Fal Vin Garath’s day was only getting worse. He was trapped inside Jason Asano’s pyramid, boxed into a dead-end corner by a man with garuda powers. If it came to a fight, Fal’s quick and mobile style would be all but useless. His only advantage was that the man in front of him had only just ranked up. Even so, fighting would be a bad choice until he could find a better battlefield.

Garuda powers were a problem. The garuda were natural born kings of the sky, and whether it was a garuda in person or an adventurer tapping into their power, they were some of the worst enemies that messengers could face.

Fighting an adventurer with garuda abilities would bring Fal prestige. He could add it to the list of reasons that winning fights in his current circumstances would bring him glory. That was also the list of things he desperately needed to avoid today, but he didn’t seem to have much choice.

With the worst possible opponent in the worst possible place, talking was the better strategy. This was not a strong area for Fal, and for most other messengers as well. Messengers didn’t negotiate with the servant races. That was beneath them. Should the servant races be graced with the presence of a messenger then all they required was the honour of obeying whatever directive they were issued. Reality, however, was not always kind. Fal, given his current circumstances, would need to talk this man, Taika, around. He did his best to not show his annoyance at needing to learn the man’s name.

“Your aura power comes from the garuda essence,” Fal said.

“Yep,” Taika confirmed.

“And you’re an outworlder. Did the garuda bring you here? Or did it come here looking for you in the first place and only stumble upon the egg?”

“I barely know that bloke. He came here for the evil egg you lot had hidden away. I have met him, though. He saw me doing the garuda thing and gave me some tips.”

Fal didn’t let a grimace cross his face. Not only did this man have garuda powers, but guidance, however brief, from an actual garuda. That was even assuming the man was telling the truth. Fal had not developed the gift of reading people from their body language,

as very few could hide their emotions from his senses. In this place, though, his magical senses were impeded, along with his aura.

“We don’t have to fight,” Fal said. “I’m here for Asano, and not even to assassinate him. I’ve been instructed to test him. With a duel. No tricks, just honest combat. Honourable combat. I’m led to believe he’ll go for that.”

“I wouldn’t go trying to predict Jason unless you predict he’ll do something insane and then make a sandwich. I don’t think he’ll go for your honourable duel, bro; he doesn’t much like honest combat. He’s more into shameless cheating. Back stabbing. Poison. Luring people into his evil magic pyramid.”

“Harpooning someone through the chest is a rather unsubtle lure.”

“You think that’s bad? Get a look at his floral shirts then you’ll know what unsubtle is.”

“We don’t have to fight. What would you get out of it?”

“Cardio? But you’re right, we don’t have to go at it. You could surrender. Jason wants us to take any messengers we fight alive if we can. That being said, you might want to fight to the death instead.”

“Why? What does he want us for?”

“I’m not going to lie: I stopped paying attention pretty early when he explained it to us. It’s always ‘astral this’ and ‘spirit that’ with him. I think you messengers have some kind of energy he can... well, he didn’t use the word *eat*, but it sure felt like he was talking around it.”

“Eat?”

“I know, right? Jason can be a pretty creepy dude. I mean, he’s probably not going to *eat you* eat you, but he is big on sucking the life force out of people. Which he insists is not the same as drinking blood or eating people, but I dunno, bro. There’s only so many times a bloke can tell you he’s not eating people before you start to think he’s definitely eating people.”

“Eating is a disgusting practice, whatever you eat. We messengers sustain ourselves on the power of the cosmos.”

“Jason too. It’s a little weird how much you guys are like a copy of him.”

“We are a copy of no one. My people are ancient, while he is less the three decades old. He is a copy of us.”

“If you say so, bro,” Taika said sceptically.

“Why don’t you take me to Asano? He and I can settle things between us.”

“I told you he’s not here.”

“But he is somewhere.”

“Sure, but he doesn’t want you there. He wants you here. You think he can’t kill you with this building? The only reason you aren’t a puddle of gooey flesh soup right now is that he doesn’t want you to be. He’s waiting for your gold-rank friends to come in here, too. As for you, he fed you to me.”

“Are you saying you eat people as well?”

“What? No, gross. It’s an intimidating metaphor, bro. Was it scary? This is my first time bantering with a supervillain. It kind of sucks that you’re basically evil Angel, though. He’s the worst X-Man. People might tell you it’s the guy whose only power is to blow himself up the one time, but at least that’s interesting. Angel’s just got wings. He should start a courier service or something, not fight evil. Why are you looking at me like you have no idea what I’m talking about?”

“Because I have no idea what you’re talking about. You and I may well fight to the death.”

“Can’t take yourself too seriously, bro. I watched Jason do that and it kind of messed him up. So, yeah, it’s a little bit gallows humour, but I’ll get by. So long as you’re the one swinging on the gallows.”

“Again, we don’t need to fight.”

“Bro, you and yours just smashed your way into this city. As we speak, you pricks are trying to break into the places the innocent people are hiding so you can kill them just to make a point.”

Fal saw a potential way forward in Taika’s words. It could be considered traitorous, but he’d never been ordered not to voice conclusions he came to on his own. And since the Voice of the Will had thrown him to the wolves, he had no loyalty to her.

“That’s not really what’s happening,” he told Taika. “The woman who masterminded this attack doesn’t even care about what happens. She’s just using me, like she is you. She doesn’t tell me anything, but her plans go beyond this attack, and I know what she really wants. It’s all internal messenger politics and her own ambition.”

For the first time in their encounter, Taika looked hesitant.

“Then what’s it really about?” he asked.

“I know why she wants Asano. Take me to him and we can talk about it. Work out something that forwards all our agendas, rather than those of the people that sent me here.”

“The best I can do is lock you up until he comes to you. I mean, you’re locked up already, if I’m being honest. Jason could just seal off the hallway and leave you in there. Or make your body rot away, although I hope he doesn’t. Not for your sake, but I just had



a shower. Washing off this blood will be bad enough, but I don't want melty messenger on me. It should be fine, though. He decided to let me test out my new power level on you, where he can keep me safe. It's a little condescending, but he means well. Unlike you."

"We may be on different sides, but we at least have some common interests."

"Mate, I'm hearing words but it's not your mouth you're speaking out from. You're talking about some kind of what? An alliance against your bosses? You think I'm that easy to manipulate? That you can lure me into that kind of trust? You didn't even tell me your name. It didn't even occur to you that it might be a good idea, when you're trying to suborn some bloke, to give him the basic courtesy of an introduction."

"I am Fal Vin Garath."

"I don't care what your name is now. You missed your window to paint yourself as anything other than a piece of crap that knows how long his odds are. Jason put me here to kick the crap out of you, and that's what I'm going to do. You're training wheels, bloke."

"I can be far more valuable to you than that. I have to serve the messengers above me, but they've sent me here to die. We can work something out. You, me and Asano. The attack on the city doesn't matter."

Fal immediately saw that he'd made a mistake as Taika's expression went from amiable to stormy.

"Doesn't matter?" he growled, his normally high-pitched voice taking on the deeper timbre of rage. "People are dying. Innocent people. There was never a single second where you thought of their deaths as a bad thing, was there? You don't think their lives matter any more than I matter enough to give me your name."

"Yes, we come at this from very different perspectives. But perhaps we can find a way to an ending we both want. If you take me to Asano—"

"You don't get Jason," Taika said, his ominously soft. Even Fal, oblivious to social cues, could sense the lurking violence. He didn't wait, making the first attack himself.

He conjured a second sword into his other hand and swept both at Taika's neck. Each was blocked by a huge forearm but this time, Fal did not stop at a single strike, launching into a combination of flashing moves, up and down Taika's body.

To Fal's surprise, Taika didn't keep blocking. Where a blade struck without active blocking, his flesh still turned emerald green and resisted the damage, but wasn't as resilient. Fal's blades managed only shallow cuts, but they successfully scored Taika's flesh.

It only took a moment for Fal to realise what Taika was doing as the already big man grew to match Fal's height. His head became that of an eagle, red and gold feathers

running down to his shoulders like a mane. His body retained its chocolate colouring and tattoos but became leaner, sleek yet powerful. Taika went from bodybuilder to boxer, his physique optimised for quick, explosive power. His fingers and his feet became more talon-like, and wings appeared on his back. They were feathered in red and gold but, like Fal, he had to keep them tucked away.

The change took less than a second, but Fal's reflexes were fast even for a silver-ranker. He tried to use the moment to slip past Taika and escape the dead end, but it was a hard ask. Taika, as it turned out, also had superior reflexes, and superior strength to go with it. He grabbed Fal by the face and slammed him back into the wall, his feet no longer floating but dangling from where Taika held him in place.

Fal dropped his swords, grabbed Taika's arm and used one of his powers. A spiral blade of force shot its way up Taika's arm, which immediately turned green and hard. Even so, the corkscrew of energy wound its way up his arms, spraying blood as it gouged a deep, razor-thin wound in stony green flesh.

Taika's grip loosened as his arm flinched. Fal slipped out and again made to escape past Taika. Taika grabbed at a wing but another of Fal's powers rendered it almost frictionless, as if greased. It slid through Taika's fingers and Fal managed to slide around him, his wings brushing against the wall. The open corridor was still restrictive, but at least he wasn't boxed into a dead end. He conjured fresh swords as Taika turned on him, glaring with eagle eyes.

Garuda were paragons of speed, power and fortitude. Fal considered himself their match in pace and mobility, but he and Taika both had their speed constrained by the environment. That left Taika with strength and resilience, and Fal with a massive disadvantage. His best bet was to hope that Taika felt pressured by the restrictiveness of the space.

"I will face you in honourable combat," Fal declared. "But this tunnel is unworthy of our duel. Surely this place has at least one room large room for us to fight in."

Taika didn't sneer, refuse or mock. He didn't say anything. His fist broke the speed of sound, the pressure wave hitting Fal like a compressed hurricane.

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"I will face you in honourable combat," the messenger declared, Taika managing not to scoff. He had no illusions about the honour of the messengers. The fact Fal was even having a conversation instead of making imperious demands meant the messenger knew exactly how bad his situation was. He was angling for a fight where he wasn't an insect in a jar.

“But this tunnel is unworthy of our duel,” Fal continued. “Surely this place has at least one room large room for us to fight in.”

Taika’s response was a single punch.

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#### Ability: [God-Striking Fist] (Garuda)

- Special attack (dimension, holy).
- Cost: Extreme stamina, extreme mana.
- Cooldown: Six-hundred and sixty-six minutes.
  
- Current rank: Silver 0 (00%).
  
- Effect (iron): Make a hard, fast punch. Time and space manipulation will not function in the vicinity while the punch is being swung.
  
- Effect (bronze): Cooldown is reduced based on the condition of the enemy after the attack. More resilient enemies results in a shorter cooldown time. An amount of stamina and mana is refunded based on the condition of the enemy. A sufficiently resilient enemy may trigger a refund of stamina and mana greater than the initial cost.
  
- Effect (silver): Damage inflicted is transcendent.

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The very air thundered at the passage of Taika’s fist as it broke the sound barrier. Fal, astoundingly, was fast enough to start dodging, but not enough to completely avoid it. He bounced off the wall and the ceiling before hitting the other end of the hallway like a bomb.

Taika whispered urgently under his breath.

“Please don’t get up, please don’t get up.”

For all the power of Taika’s hit, the messenger floated up from the floor for a third time since being dragged into Jason’s pyramid.

“That sucks, bro,” Taika told him. “If you’d stayed down, I could have totally been One-Punch Man.”

## Chapter 689

### Security Oversight

Taika looked down the hallway at the messenger floating at the end of it. After being impaled and smashed into walls multiple times, the once-glorious being now looked like a bird that couldn't stop flying into windows. As for Taika himself, he was in a strange state where he was both exhausted from his recent rank-up and simultaneously tingling with energy from his shape-change ability.

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#### Ability: [King of the Sky] (Wing)

- Special ability (shape-change).
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: None.
  
- Current rank: Silver 0 (00%).
  
- Effect (iron): Take the form of a garuda. [Power] and [Speed] attributes are increased. Wings allow for gliding but not flight without an additional power. Powers that conjure wings instead use the wings of this form and have significantly enhanced flight speed and manoeuvrability.
  
- Effect (bronze): Aura suppression and suppression resistance against any creature with wings or that is currently flying is significantly increased.
  
- Effect (silver): Certain other abilities have enhanced effects. Affected abilities: Emerald Flesh, Grace of Garuda, Golden Wings, Block Out the Sun, Feaster of Serpents, Amrita, Brother of the Dawn.

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Taika was reminded of a time before he knew magic was real, fending off sleep deprivation with enough coffee to animate the dead. His poison resistance would now put paid to any effect caffeine once had on him, yet he found himself with that same odd sensation. His body was heavy, yet an electric charge ran through it.

He was starting to think that Jason may have been right to warn him against going outside in his current state. Even so, he still had a ragged bird man to deal with before he sought out precious slumber.

Fal glared back at Taika, conjuring fresh swords yet again. Then he glanced down the passage where the hallway turned, leading elsewhere in the building. Taika saw him looking and burst out laughing.

“Are you gonna leg it? If I were you, I'd definitely scarper, but I'm not a messenger. Where's the pride, bro? If you run, that kind of makes me look superior, and I once

squashed my plums trying to sit on a chair like a guy from *Star Trek*. You wouldn't know him."

Fal faced Taika, his conciliatory façade completely gone. Although bloodied and beaten, his eyes stared imperiously, his pride and disdain no longer hidden away. His arms became a blur, firing off blades of wind that rushed unavoidably down the corridor at Taika.

Taika didn't try to dodge or even stand his ground and endure. He launched himself down the hallway, not running, not even really flying. He was shooting like a bullet.

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#### Ability: [Momentum Charge] (Swift)

- Special attack (movement, combination).
- Cost: High mana and stamina.
- Cooldown: Four minutes.
  
- Current rank: Silver 0 (00%).
  
- Effect (iron): Charge attack. Rapidly gain [Momentum] during the charge. Can culminate in a non-combination special attack.
  
- Effect (bronze): Can cover extreme distances and move through the air. The speed of the charge escalates over the duration of the charge.
  
- Effect (silver): The damage from [Momentum] is enhanced by your speed at the moment the attack lands.
  
- [Momentum] (boon, magic, stacking): When making an attack, all instances are consumed to inflict resonating-force damage. Multiple instances can be accumulated and instances are lost quickly while not moving.

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Fal's wind blades exploded onto Taika in rapid succession but failed to penetrate his skin as it again turned green to resist the damage. With hits landing all over his body, Taika had turned almost entirely emerald, his tattoos standing out in stark contrast. Damage was not the primary purpose of the wind blades, however, which exploded with force that pushed back against Taika's forward motion. Taika saw the surprise on Fal's face as he didn't slow down at all.

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#### Ability: [Unstoppable Strike] (Swift)

- Special attack (movement).
- Cost: Moderate mana and stamina.
- Cooldown: One minute.

- **Current rank: Silver 0 (00%).**
  - **Effect (iron):** Melee attack. If any instances of [Momentum] are triggered by the attack, they deal an amount of disruptive-force equal to the resonating-force damage.
  - **Effect (bronze):** When combined with a movement-combination special attack, the physical momentum of that attack is extremely hard to impede. Physical barriers and constraints are struck with resonating-force damage. Magical barriers and constraints are struck with disruptive-force damage. Resistances to any effect that impedes motion are significantly increased for the duration of the combination attack.
  - **Effect (silver):** The cooldown of this ability is reset when using a movement-combination special attack, allowing this ability to be combined with that attack.
- 

Fal managed to interpose his wings between himself and Taika, snaking them around his body from where they were tucked behind him. They absorbed the damage, but the damage was still enough for blood to stain where the blunt attack crashed into them. Fal bounced off the wall behind him like a ball as Taika threw aside the protective wings. The beak of his eagle-headed face came down like a pickaxe digging for ore.

Fal's skull was hard and the beak slid across it and down the messenger's face. The result was a massive gouge that took one of his eyes with it. Taika didn't waste time, immediately following up with rapid punches. Despite his wound, Fal was just as fast, his short swords clashing with Taika's fists. Even boxed into a hallway, both men showed off their blinding speed, their movements a blur as they clashed.

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#### Ability: [Grace of Garuda] (Wing)

- **Special ability (movement).**
  - **Cost: None.**
  - **Cooldown: None.**
  - **Current rank: Silver 0 (00%).**
  - **Effect (iron):** [Speed] attribute, reflexes, movement speed and perceptual speed are increased.
  - **Effect (bronze):** Mana and stamina costs of movement abilities are reduced. Gain instances of [Momentum] while moving at high speed.
  - **Effect (silver):** Instances of [Momentum] gained from other abilities take longer to drop off when not moving. When [Momentum] is triggered, instead of all instances being immediately consumed, they begin rapidly dropping off one at a time. This continues until all instances are gone or additional instances are gained.
-

The difference between the combatants swiftly became apparent. While Fal did have a slight edge in speed, he didn't have the room to dodge that was a hallmark of his elusive fighting style. They traded blows at staggering speed, with Fal coming out the worst. Forced to block a much stronger opponent, he was constantly being hammered with fists that landed like wrecking balls. When he got a blade past Taika's blocking arms, by contrast, they managed little more than shallow cuts in jade flesh. If Taika got an arm in the way, they did nothing at all. The only real damage Fal managed to inflict came from magical attacks, his spiral cutting magic proving the most effective.

Bleeding from spiral cuts, Taika managed to body-press Fal into the wall. He then conjured an amphora to drink from while keeping the messenger pinned. As soon as he drank, his wounds began healing faster.

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#### Ability: [Amrita] (Garuda)

- **Special ability (conjunction, restoration).**
- **Cost: Varies.**
- **Cooldown: Varies.**
  
- **Current rank: Silver 0 (00%).**
  
- **Effect (iron):** Conjure a jar containing one to five doses of restorative elixir that bestows an ongoing health and mana recovery effect. The elixir may be shared and does not interact toxically with other potions. Cooldown is predicated on how many doses are conjured, from one minute for one dose to fifteen minutes for five doses. Mana cost is low, moderate, high, very high or extreme, depending on the number of doses conjured.
  
- **Effect (bronze):** For the duration of the elixir's recovery effect, abilities that provide damage reduction are enhanced.
  
- **Effect (silver):** Duration of the elixir's ongoing recovery effect is increased. The elixir can be converted to a life elixir at an extreme mana cost per dose. Life elixir has no effect when consumed but does not disappear after being removed from the amphora and may be used as a material in rituals and crafting.

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Fal's body turned slick while Taika was drinking from the amphora. He slid from between Taika and the wall, dashing down the hallway Taika had goaded him into not using earlier. Taika dropped the amphora, which vanished before it hit the ground, but didn't rush after Fal.

"Drinking with a beak is tough," he observed to himself, then looked down the hall. Fal was swift, having already vanished around a corner. Taika glanced at the trail of blood left behind.

“I don’t know where you think you’re going, bro. There’s no way out and you’re Hansel & Gretaling pretty hard.”

“I feel obligated to point out, Mr Williams,” Shade’s voice came from Taika’s shadow, “that ‘Gretaling’ is not a verb. Or a word.”

“Bro, have you been in there the whole time?”

“Mr Asano has given me strict instructions not to explain when or where I may be at any given time. He likes people to realise I could always be watching.”

“The Panopticon effect, I get it. That’s a rude thing to do to your friends, bro.”

“Indeed,” Shade concurred. “Mr Asano has some rather authoritarian tendencies. But your attention should be on the blood trail, Mr Williams.”

Taika looked at the blood trail and saw the floor turn from hard stone to soft cloud material and siphon the blood away. A glance at the wall he had smashed Fal into showed that it was likewise being automatically cleaned and repaired.

“Oh, bloody oath,” Taika muttered and then rushed off, following the rapidly disappearing trail of blood.

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Fal realised in short order that not only was the pyramid all hallways and no doors, but it was also changing as he moved through it. Dead ends forced him to backtrack into places that were not the same as when he passed through moments earlier. He recalled what Taika had said about Asano waiting for the gold-rankers to invade. He didn’t know if the pyramid was powerful enough to contain them, but knew that they would test it sooner or later. He was not getting out and they would assume he died and come after, to eliminate the pyramid as a threat.

Fal was recovering swiftly. His burst eye had grown back but its vision was still blurry. Even if he was fully restored, however, it didn’t matter. There was no door he could break through in search of hostages or a better place to fight. His most powerful attacks had bounced off the walls in his attempts to breach them. Taika had made some serious dents, mostly with Fal’s head, but Fal himself lacked the strength. Powerful attacks were not his strong point. There was no escaping Taika in these halls, and Fal had accepted that in these halls, he couldn’t win. All that remained was choosing the most dignified manner in which to lose.

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Taika followed the blood trail being rapidly devoured by the cloud palace’s passive cleaning functions.



“I suggest you hasten, Mr Williams. The gold rankers have decided to invade the building. The gap at the top was apparently too tempting to resist.”

“How’s it going?”

“They rushed in deep before they realised that walls were closing behind them. The afflictions are just starting to break past their resistances and they are debating whether to start smashing walls to go deeper or smashing walls to get out.”

“Which one do you want them to do?”

“It doesn’t matter. They don’t realise that Mr Asano can reorient the chamber they are in, gravity included. Whatever wall they break through, he will choose where it leads. They will need to rapidly break through walls in a straight line if they want to get out. Mr Asano will allow that, so long as they don’t head in the direction of one of the dormitories where people are secured.”

“How is he doing all this? Doesn’t he have his own thing going on elsewhere?”

“Mr Asano’s unusual nature includes a certain level of multitasking. It’s similar to how gods watch all of their followers and sacred grounds. On a much more limited scale, obviously.”

Taika rounded a corner and found Fal waiting for him. The messenger was looking much-restored but his former glory remained buried under a coating of blood, pounded out of him by Taika’s fists. His swords were in his hands, dangling loosely at his sides.

“I won’t surrender,” he said, resignation in his voice. “There is no shame in failing an impossible task, only in giving it up.”

“Cool story, bro.”

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Taika was leaving a fresh trail of silver-gold blood as he dragged Fal through the hallways by the hair. Along with the thick line on the floor, marks punctuated the walls where Taika occasionally slammed the messenger’s head. The fast healing messenger kept blearily rousing. Shade had emerged from Taika’s shadow to move alongside him.

“You did very well, Mr Williams.”

“These are pretty controlled conditions,” Taika said. “I don’t think anyone needed me to deal with this guy.”

“Will you go out to join the fight, then?”

“Nah, bro. I got that out of my system. I’m barely staying on my feet here. I’m glad you kept me from going out, so thanks. It would have been pretty rough.”

Fal moaned insensibly as he threatened to rouse again. Taika was about to slam the messenger’s head into the wall again when Jason’s aura surged. This wasn’t the

background aura that always suffused the cloud palace but something coming from further away. It was a deeper, richer aura projection than anything Taika had experienced.

“Is that Jason himself?” Taika asked.

“Boosted, but yes,” Shade said. “I believe his pursuers will be able to find him now.”

The messenger started thrashing like a fish on a hook, his hair still gripped in Taika’s hand. Taika wasn’t sure if it was some kind of frenzy or if Fal was having a seizure, but it stopped when the messenger’s head hit the wall hard enough to crack the dark stone. The stone turned into mist briefly, drawing away the blood and restoring the wall to a clean, undamaged condition.

“Do you think I could get that installed at my mum’s house?”

“Perhaps not that exact thing, Mr Williams, but I imagine something similar. You should talk to Miss Farrah or Mr Standish once we make our way back to Earth.”

“Bro, why do you only ever use women’s first names? I’ve heard you call Emi and Erika and Farrah by their first names, but you even use Jason’s surname, and you’re his familiar.”

“I don’t use all women’s first names,” Shade pointed out. “Only the ones I like the most. Also, it made things easier when everyone was named Asano.”

Taika gave Shade a side glance.

“Jason still doesn’t let you spy on people in bathrooms, right?”

“It’s observing, Mr Williams, not spying. But no; that security oversight remains.”

## Chapter 690

### Heretic

There was a single diamond-ranker amongst the messenger forces, Mah Go Schaat. He had no interest in the astral king's goals, and longed for the day he would no longer have to take the woman's directives. He was already powerful enough that she could only ask so much of him, and he gave no more than was strictly required. He was still bound to her service, however, until he finally found the path to astral king for himself. In the meantime, he was stuck servicing her agenda, as delivered through her Voice of the Will, Jes Fin Kaal.

He was under no requirement to handle any issues below diamond-rank. In his current deployment, this meant countering the native diamond-rankers when they participated in raids on the messenger strongholds. Now that the messengers were the ones on the attack, he would be part of it. The diamond-rank adventurers would doubtlessly participate in the defence of their city, meaning that Schaat was obligated to join the attack.

The natives had two diamond-rankers. They were weak for the rank, but Schaat was not a fool. He knew that even the weakest diamond-ranker was one of the deadliest entities in any world, even if they weren't a messenger. He had no intention of taking them lightly, and if the attack plan had not involved softening them up with an apocalypse beast, he would not have participated at all. His obligations to the astral king did not include suicide missions, which meant that Jes Fin Kaal had been careful to hide that this mission was exactly that.

Schaat did not realise the duplicity of the voice until he breached the barrier from above and his senses spread across the city. He didn't care about the operation, or how it served the astral king's goals. Beyond what the astral king demanded of him, Schaat didn't care at all. Even so, using four life-forge gates to attack this unimportant city struck him as wasteful. He had wondered what the voice saw in the place that was worth the expenditure, but not enough to interact with his lesser and ask. It was only after he breached the barrier from above that he realised he should have.

With the barrier stained blue and covered in monsters like bees on honeycomb, he could not see inside. Neither did his formidable magical senses reach through the barrier, such was the strength of such a formidable emplacement. The presence of the garuda had been hidden from him.

That the garuda was here now, right as the genesis egg was activated, was too staggering a coincidence. Someone who knew about the egg must have leaked that information at just the right time to coincide with the attack. As a result, the diamond-rankers had been spared from pushing into that chaotic clash.

That left the question of what anyone got from leaking that information. The answer, to Schaat's mind, was obvious: it got him. He was inside the barrier, now, with two diamond-rankers to deal with. As for who had set it up, that was equally obvious.

While the management of the astral king's local operations fell to Jes Fin Kaal, she was ultimately a gold-ranker, Voice of the Will or not. She had neither the power nor the right to overrule Schaat on almost any matter, should he take an interest. Nor could she make major decisions without passing them by him. He had been willing to overlook the costly life-forge gates because he liked that she didn't bother him with every little thing. But he now understood that he should have paid more attention.

Schaat had been expecting the native diamond-rankers to have expended significant resources fighting the naga genesis egg, making them easy picking for Schaat to deal with. Instead, he found a gods-bedamned garuda eating the egg like it was breakfast, the remains of countless serpents demonstrating the epic battle it had waged on the egg's spawn to reach that point. Even now, giant serpents attacked the garuda while smaller ones rushed off into the city. The garuda allowed it for the moment as it finished off the egg, tearing chunks off with its beak, which would cut off the serpents at the source.

The entire raid was a trap. It was an assassination attempt disguised as a city invasion, so that Schaat would die and Jes Fin Kaal would no longer be under his thumb.

It grated, but did not surprise, that the astral king permitted this. The Voice of the Will would never go after a diamond-ranker without her approval, however deniable the plan might be. Schaat avoided politics entirely, so he had no idea what schemes Kaal and the astral king were working on. He was focused on becoming an astral king himself, but clearly, he had been remiss in his narrow focus. While he had been in study, she had obviously been making back-handed deals that would forestall any backlash from the upper-tier messengers at the attempt to kill him off. Arranging the death of a diamond-ranker was no small thing, even if it was unlikely to stick.

Schaat's first thought had been to abandon the raid. The barrier breach was right there, as he had just made it. But that, in itself, was a trap. He was obligated to participate in the attack because of the diamond-rank adventurers and the garuda's presence didn't change that. Kaal would deny arranging events, and now that Schaat had joined the fray, flight would be seen as cowardice. Kaal could claim he fled in fear and have him neatly

removed from authority, which equally got her what she wanted. If anything, that was an ideal outcome for her, as it avoided any chance of backlash from getting him killed.

Only if Schaat could prove she arranged everything would he have a case to defend his reputation, and it would not entirely erase the sting of having fled. Kaal was also not sloppy enough to leave threads for him to pull on after the fact. If things had reached this stage, he was certain she had already cleaned up after herself.

That left Schaat with an unenviable choice. If he left, he would be safe but disgraced. While he did not enjoy his responsibilities, the authority that came with them was essential to his efforts in becoming an astral king. If he was branded a coward, his status as a diamond-ranker would hold less weight, leaving him even more subject to the astral king's control.

The only option that remained was to fight. Fortunately, the garuda would not participate. He was here for the serpents and no garuda would fight on Kaal's behalf. Schaat imagined the garuda had seen through Kaal's manipulations and only gone along with them enough to get what he wanted. Kaal would get no more out of him, of that Schaat was certain.

That still left two diamond-rank adventurers. Schaat had clashed with both in the past and was confident that he could deal with either one alone, but not both together. They knew his strength as well, and working as a pair in their own territory, they would be able to fight him to a stalemate. For them, keeping him from rampaging through their gold rankers was enough.

This was not a situation where Schaat could kill one quickly and move on to the other before the first revived. Even if the one he killed lacked a power to accelerate his resurrection, there was no way to kill a diamond-ranker quickly. It was why the high-rank effects of assassination powers moved away from damage and into escape prevention and revival negation.

Killing diamond-rankers took planning. Getting them to stay dead was often the result of decades, if not centuries of elaborate plotting. Schaat was confident that even if he died here, the most Kaal could have arranged was for his resurrection to be delayed, not shut down entirely. That would have been too traceable, and all she needed was him gone long enough to carry out her plans, whatever they were. Whether he was trapped in death for a while or disgraced into irrelevance, she got what she wanted.

He wasn't going to let that happen.

Schaat still had certain advantages. Even if he was just stumbling onto Kaal's schemes, he could interpolate weaknesses based on what her schemes would have had

by necessity. She wouldn't be able to get the garuda or the diamond rank adventurers to actively participate in her plans as that would be too easy to trace back to her. Instead, she would have had to align their agendas with hers, which could only go so far.

Schaat considered the people in play. The garuda knew better than to interfere too heavily in a universe the World-Phoenix had isolated from the wider cosmic community. Although they were famously individualistic, they would not fly in the face of a great astral being's agenda the way the messengers would.

The World-Phoenix would not object to it hunting down the naga genesis egg, as that was their purview. It would even allow some nudging of locals in one direction or another, in moderation, but starting a war with the messengers was too far. The messengers had paid a price for defying the World-Phoenix and invading this world that the garuda would not. As for the diamond-rank adventurers, they would be satisfied if Schaat left their city, having no need to see him dead.

The path to frustrating Jes Fin Kaal's plans, then, was to stall. He couldn't ignore the diamond-rank adventurers or the voice would rightly claim dereliction of responsibility. But he didn't have to kill them, or even really hurt them. All he had to do was occupy them, keeping them off the gold-rank messengers. So long as he did that, he could ignore everything else and then withdraw with the rest of the messenger forces at the end of the raid.

He would accomplish no more than the bare minimum in assisting the raid, making sure the diamond-rankers were occupied and no more. He had no investment in the operation even before it turned out to be a pretence to kill him. If he came out unscathed, and the voice claimed he hadn't done enough, he could simply state that the adventurers were too challenging. No, why sacrifice his pride over it? He would claim that the voice's plan was flawed. If anything, the more messengers that died, the worse Jes Fin Kaal looked. So long as those deaths weren't laid at his door, it was the first step in turning the tables on Kaal and having her removed.

He wouldn't be allowed to kill her outright, as she belonged to an astral king. But this was the start of a path by which he could reveal her machinations and duplicities, forcing the astral king to revoke her protection. It meant dirtying his hands in politics, but after this, he would do just that. He could wash them clean in her blood when she was the one disgraced and he was finally free to kill her.

Schaat engaged the diamond-rank adventurers, as was required. He was overtly cautious, his opponents quickly realising that he was stalling for time. They were

suspicious of diamond-rank reinforcements, at first, but eventually realised the truth: that he wanted to leave the city as much as they wanted him to go.

Both sides still clashed. Schaat had to keep up appearances and the adventurers would not leave him be in case his disinterest was a ploy. They took no incautious chances, fully expecting a no-score draw once the raid was done. If they could avoid a diamond-ranker rampaging through the city, they would. The garuda was closer to fighting for them than not, and yet had done more damage than all the messengers and their summoned monsters combined.

The intermittent combat, with neither side overcommitting, left Schaat with the spare attention to watch the city with his magical senses. Some of the more powerful gold-rankers – from either side – might have been tempted by the voice to intervene, despite the danger. Reaching diamond rank was not as hard as transcending it, but it was still a threshold that most failed to cross. The insight an astral king's servant could offer, garnered from her mistress, would sway the hearts of many.

There was no sign of further duplicity, however, and Schaat did not expect it to appear. The temptation to keep adding more complexity to a plan was how it unravelled, and Schaat acknowledged that Kaal was not so foolish. But the gold-rank adventurers seemed to be paying their diamond-ranked compatriots very little attention, concentrating on the defence of their city. As for the messengers, they were revelling in getting back at the servant races. Schaat could only agree that the servant races needed to be shown their places after having the temerity to attack messenger strongholds.

Marek Nior Vargas caught his eye, the gold-rank commander seeming to have as little interest in the attack's success as Schaat himself. Schaat saw the man as a potential rival, should he ever reach diamond. He was smart, straightforward and mostly avoided politics. He also hated Jes Fin Kaal, meaning that of all the commanders, he was the least likely to be part of her plot. Schaat didn't entirely dismiss the possibility, though, as strange things were happening in the commander's battlefield.

Although remaining slightly wary of Marek, Schaat dismissed the strange activity as it was only occurring amongst the silver-rankers. While some gold-ranker could potentially pose a threat, however negligible, nothing from two ranks below could be a danger. Nothing from two ranks down could even surprise him, or so he thought until he sensed something in Marek's zone. It was close to the ground, some manner of ritual magic, but not of a kind that should exist in this world.

It was a kind of magic he had only encountered in his studies of transcendent power, in his pursuit of astral king status. More astoundingly – he would say impossibly, if not

sensing it at that very moment – it was silver rank. How was anyone in this world, even the diamond-rankers, using intrinsic-mandate magic?

"Kaal, what did you do?" he muttered with a grin. It didn't matter what she was scheming now, because this was a step too far.

"No," he corrected himself, realising that Kaal was not behind it. There was no way she would risk getting caught dabbling with intrinsic-mandate magic as a Voice of the Will. Even if she was careful and used foes of the messengers as proxies, it was too dangerous. If the astral king she served found her meddling with a different higher-order power, her privileged position and everything that came with it would be instantly revoked.

This made whoever or whatever was using that magic a curiosity. Not a threat, as it was still silver-ranked, but perhaps a warning of greater threats to come. He wondered if the garuda was behind it. It wouldn't make a lot of sense, but the messengers, the garuda and the naga genesis egg were the only cosmic-level forces in play. If it was actually coming from some local silver-ranker, that represented something outside of Schaat's knowledge, experience or studies.

Schaat waited for the magic to trigger, hoping the result would give him more clues. If he was smart about it, he could potentially leverage this to get his revenge on Jes Fin Kaal. He absently wondered how they were even feeding it the required power. Examining it with his senses, he discovered it was some manner of aura projection ritual, and immediately wondered why. It would only be able to affect a silver-rank aura, and what silver-rank aura was worth that kind of magic?

The answer exploded across the city, blanketing every battlefield inside the barrier. It was the most comprehensive aura projection Schaat had ever encountered, fully revealing every nuance of the projected aura. And the aura itself was startling, from the strength relative to its rank to the scars that marked it. They spoke of spiritual battles no silver-ranker should have encountered, let alone, endured. Each one told a story of tribulations faced and overcome. Gods and great astral beings; unwinnable fights and world-shaking resolve.

There was more to it, as well. The base nature of the aura was a grab-bag of cosmic forces. The gestalt nature of the messengers and the nascent realm of an astral king. The spiritual domains of divine territory and the intrinsic mandate of the great astral beings.

Schaat was staggered at what he was sensing. This was the embryo of something beyond monstrous. It was a power that crossed cosmic lines; a myth from before the sundering. He doubted that anyone else on the battlefield even realised what they were sensing.



There were five diamond-rank beings in the city, counting the garuda and the remnants of the egg. Normally, any aura ranked below theirs would shrivel back like a withering plant. A silver rank aura should be washed away like words in the sand as the tide rolled in, yet it did not. It could certainly not push back such auras, but it shared the space they occupied, utterly unyielding.

Schaat knew that the messengers throughout the city would be rattled. They wouldn't understand all of what the aura contained, but what they could was enough. That it possessed their gestalt physical-spiritual nature meant that it shared their inherent superiority. Some might even think it was one of them.

That realisation was nothing, however, next to the unmistakable nature of an astral king. Mortals might not recognise it, but no messenger could miss it, even if the astral realm behind it was incomplete. It was an astral king, at silver rank, flying in the face of everything the messengers knew. It mocked their ambitions, everything they strove for. Only those who knew the origin of their kind would realise what the owner of that aura was. But as Schaat himself had only uncovered that secret in his studies of transcendent power, he was likely the only messenger on the field that did.

Across the city, messengers froze in place. Even some of the gold-rankers were affected. It wasn't any kind of magical compulsion, and it certainly couldn't suppress their interlinked auras. It was simple shock. The very existence of whatever was behind that aura was a challenge to everything the messengers believed about themselves, their ambitions and the superiority that defined them.

Schaat was past the blind indoctrination of his youth. He knew the origins of his kind and the lies that governed their society. He knew that the messengers, as a whole, were not inherently superior. Superiority was for individuals, like him. But for those blinded by self-aggrandisement, being confronted by someone that seemed to share their nature, yet was an astral king at silver-rank, in defiance of it? He knew that for those without the will to adapt, it would be an almost religious experience, and not a positive one.

Messengers neither worshipped gods nor venerated great astral beings. They obeyed the astral kings, but did not pray to them. Messengers worshipped themselves and their faith was towering. But for messengers all across the city, that tower had just shifted at the foundations.

Although it felt like an eternity, the strange stillness that spread over the city lasted only a fleeting moment. Barely a second went by before the messengers were moving again, most now overtaken with rage. The gold-rankers held themselves together but many of the silver-rankers were behaving strangely.

A few scattered handfuls were listless, not resuming the fight. Around half of the silver-rankers were doing the opposite and going berserk. Some left their battlefields to seek out the source of the aura. Others were too caught up in fights and launched themselves at their enemies in frothing zeal.

The messengers, who had no religion, had found their first heretic.