

## Chapter 792

### Share the Responsibility

Both in the underground realm of the brighthearts and previous transformation zones, dimensional powers had been tricky. Still floating in the air with his familiars, Jason tried opening a gate to his soul realm and was pleasantly surprised to find that it worked. A circle of milky white stone appeared in the air and was filled with rainbow light as the portal opened.

At least in the territory he had claimed, Jason had access to his soul realm and the resources within. What he needed right now were the messengers he had stashed away. Jali Corrik Fen and Marek Nior Vargas emerged from the portal.

Marek was a gold-ranker who had led his personal followers to Jason in hope of escaping the oppression of the messenger astral kings. His obsession was joining the Unorthodoxy, the messenger resistance movement. Before that could happen, he needed to convince Jason to set them free.

Jali was only silver-rank. Despite a life of misgivings about messenger doctrine she had carefully avoided becoming entangled with the Unorthodoxy out of fear. Used as a pawn by her masters, she had been liberated by Jason.

Messengers were far from aerodynamically sound but the magic that allowed them to fly was primarily seated in their wings. Marek and Jali both spread their wings to hold themselves aloft, situating themselves in front of Jason and his familiars. They turned their gazes upward, sensing the messengers that had been released from stasis, purged of the corrupted messenger tree's influence. They had stopped descending and were having some kind of discussion.

"Where are we?" Marek asked. "Some kind of dimensional space? A spirit domain? I can feel your power everywhere. Who are those messengers?"

"It's complicated," Jason said. "For now, just stand behind me and don't say anything unless I tell you to."

"I am your prisoner, Jason Asano, not your servant."

"Then go back through the portal; there's too much to explain right this second."

Marek looked at Jason, then the sky above them and then the still-open portal.

"This is not the moment to test me, Marek," Jason warned.

"Those are my people up there."

"You don't know what they are. And I just realised that having you here was a mistake. Go back in."

Marek stared Jason down for a long moment before turning and vanishing through the portal.

“He’ll want them for the Unorthodoxy,” Jason said. “I can’t let that happen.”

“Why not?” Jali asked. “Are you concerned that the other astral kings will actively pursue you if you start freeing messengers in large numbers?”

“I am now,” he said, giving her a pointed look. “But my concern is about something more important than that. These messengers are young. None are more than a year old, and until moments ago, their minds had been corrupted for their entire lives.”

“I can sense their confusion,” Jali said. “Their uncertainty. They’re worried about coming down to face us. Where did they come from?”

“They were elementally corrupted messengers.”

Jali had been one of the few messengers to see the underground realm and get out alive and uncorrupted, so she knew what he referred to.

“The corruption was removed when they were brought into this space, but it left them in a condition I suspect your kind are in directly after being created. They are, practically speaking, newborns.”

“That would mean they needed to be imprinted.”

“Because I’m already imprinted on this territory, it tried to spread my imprint to them. I intervened and had them form their own marks. Like you, but without the need to access your soul.”

“That’s normal for new messengers, but I’ve never heard of messengers being born without an astral king to obey. Not surprising, given that they’d probably purge entire collectives to cover something like that up. Where did they come from, though? There are more messengers up there now than were corrupted when we went down there.”

“A corrupted birthing tree.”

Jason pointed and Jali followed his gaze to the massive tree on the horizon. Her jaw dropped.

“That’s perverse,” Jali said. “A birthing tree outside of a birthing world? The messengers it produces would be—”

“Twisted monstrosities?” Jason finished. “Yes. But this place seems to have rectified the corruption.”

“It doesn’t matter. There’s no way they would ever be accepted. There’s a reason we worked with the Purity church to summon our forces into this world. Our doctrines fall into alignment in areas such as on excising the tainted.”

“Will you be able to accept them?”

"I don't know. My whole life I've been forcing myself to follow the line, even inside my mind. I need to re-examine everything I believed."

"And Marek?"

"I'm not sure. He rejects the astral kings so absolutely yet his thinking remains extremely traditional. But if he thinks he can use them as a weapon, he will."

"So much of what I've learned about your kind has profoundly disturbing implications. The need to brand newborns? I won't let Marek have these children."

"They're not children," Jali said. "We come into being with ancestral knowledge. Language; an understanding of the cosmos. The ways of conquest and war."

"Knowledge is not wisdom. It's not experience. You, of all people, understand the harm that can be done from an insulated upbringing built around a single, extreme point of view. I support the Unorthodoxy in principle, but Marek would turn them into child soldiers. I won't let him have them any more than I would an astral king."

"And if they want to go with Marek?"

"Then they'll have a chance to make that choice — once they're ready to make an informed one."

"And who decides when that is? You?"

"Us. You and me."

Her eyes went wide.

"I'm not ready to take responsibility for that. I've barely broken away from my own subjugation."

Jason laughed out loud.

"You think being ready has anything to do with it? I would love the chance to be ready for things. It really would have made the last half-dozen years a lot nicer. I'm sorry, Jali, but if you want to be ready for things, you need to get very far away from me. And, if I'm being honest, I think you're too late for that to be an option."

"Where would I go anyway? I don't want anything to do with the astral kings or the Unorthodoxy."

"You don't?"

"Marek Nior Vargas is passionate, but he's also driven to the point of rigidity. Whether serving or fighting the astral kings, he is entirely defined by his relationship to them. I want to figure out what I am apart from all that. The people that enslaved me as well as the ones fighting them. I don't know what to do or where to go, even assuming you allow me to go anywhere. I don't even know where I am now."

"I know that feeling. Lost, directionless. Suddenly aware of just how wrong you were about everything. Don't let it show. It's going to take some time to figure out, but until you do, don't let the world see it."

"Is that what you did?"

"Yeah."

"How did that work out?"

"Mixed results, if I'm being honest. But these messengers up there? Deciding if they're going to come down here and face us? They're more lost than you or I will ever be. We should at least give them the illusion that someone knows what they're doing."

"I don't know what's going on," Jali said. "What you've brought me into. But it's obviously complex and ongoing. It would have been more practical if you'd let your brand imprint on these and change it once things have calmed down."

"Even assuming the next crisis would be kind enough to wait for this one to pass," Jason said, "that's not acceptable. Yes, it would be more practical, but the thing about good and evil is that no one ever chooses evil. They choose selfishness or prejudice or easy answers over hard truths. They choose the expedient path, even if it means getting their hands a little dirty because they can make up for it later, right? Sometimes getting your hands dirty is what it takes. The ends justify the means."

Jason looked down at his own hands.

"I've told myself those things. Sometimes I've been right, and sometimes it was just an excuse. It would be easier to let those children become slaves. To pretend they're adults because they look like it, despite only having been truly conscious for a matter of minutes. If they do what they're told, at least for now, we wouldn't have to deal with their confusion. Instead of a liability they would be an asset, and a much-needed one for what lies ahead. And I could always erase my brand when it's over. Of course, that would be cutting them loose to face everything serving me pushed aside, plus the trauma they'd just been through. And there will be another threat they would be so useful for. I can set them free when there's time to stop and help them properly. I'll just leave the brand for now."

Jason's face was filled with disgust.

"We like to think we're better than we are," Jason said. "I've had to confront the fact that I'm not, but I've also seen that I can be. It takes discipline. Diligence. Determination. Recognising that while sometimes you do have to compromise, other times you don't. The temptation doesn't come with a choice between right and wrong. It comes with a choice between right and easy."

He ran his hands over his face and took a deep breath.

“I have a habit of going off on moralistic rants,” he explained. “It’s one of the ways I work through my insecurities about my own moral worth, and my friends tend to get caught up in it. And my enemies, sometimes. My dad. I have a lot of family troubles, but I have trouble imagining a life like yours where the concept of family is so alien. We think so differently, yet I find myself searching for common ground. I never found it with Marek.”

Jason and Jali were floating in the air. Their heads were at the same level which left the much shorter Jason’s feet somewhere around her thighs. He looked into her eyes, his nebulous eyes searching for something within her.

“Does anything I’ve said make sense to you?” he asked. “I’ve been trying to find some empathy in Marek for a while now, but you were right: His first concern is taking the fight to the astral kings. Even his companionship is more camaraderie than friendship. That’s not inherently bad, but it is a somewhat mercenary sensibility. I have higher hopes for you.”

“Why does any of this matter?”

“The way we treat people always matters. If you want something grander, then I’m still deciding how to interact with your people. I suspect that, in the millennia to come, how I deal with the messengers will affect a lot of people.”

“And what? You’re going to decide that based on me?”

“Not just that, of course, and not just now. But you have the chance to make me see something I don’t in Marek or Tera Jun Casta. What you and I learn from each other could end up being very important.”

“That’s too much responsibility.”

Jason grinned.

“I know, right? You get used to it. With a good support system and enough therapy.”

“You’re joking, but this isn’t a small thing you’re putting on me.”

“Yeah. Joking helps, trust me. I tried being super-serious and I turned into an angry prick.”

Jali turned her back to Jason, rotating in the air.

“This is too much to put on me.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “But you’re the person on the spot, and you’re stronger than you think. I saw you stand up to your astral king. The reality is, I don’t know how many free messengers are out there, but I’m guessing not a lot. That makes you important, and being important sucks. I’m hoping you can help me find a way forward with the messengers beyond the options I already have. The astral kings and their Nazi angel army obviously can’t be worked with. Marek’s Unorthodoxy has some real ‘victory or death’ energy, which

is less bad but definitely not good. I'm starting to get a Project Mayhem vibe that I don't like."

She turned back to face him.

"How much of what you say do people understand?"

"You're a smart woman, Jali. Are you telling me that you're not getting the gist from context clues?"

"No. But why would you talk to people like this?"

Jason held out his hand and squeezed with his fingers. Jali's magical senses felt the fabric of reality around her bend alarmingly. Then the sensation was gone as if it had never been.

"I have to remember who I am, Jali. I change, but if I ever let go of who I am without all this power, the power becomes who I am. That's not good for anyone. Except the god of dominion, maybe."

"You're sharing a lot with me."

"I'm hoping it will help you. You're not on the path I walked, but I think you'll see a lot of the same landmarks."

"Should you be thinking about things like this when you have more immediate issues to deal with?"

"Yes, I should. I've always had this idea in my head that I didn't choose the responsibilities that now rest on me, but that hasn't been true for a long time. I did choose, many times, and now I have to live up to that. You've sensed the brighthearts in my soul realm. I've kept them underground, away from the rest of you, but you've felt their presence."

"Yes."

"They represent what's left of an entire civilisation. An entire species. I'm responsible for them now because I chose to be. Just like you and I are about to be responsible for these messengers above us. And a lot more before we're done. This is just one territory of many."

He drifted closer and put his hands on her shoulders.

"If you don't want to be part of that, I get it. My asking you isn't fair, I know that. Not when there is so much I haven't told you and when you're still coming to terms with the massive changes you've gone through. The portal is right there. If you go through it, I won't ask you to do anything like this again. But I'm certain that you and I together can do better for these people than I can alone. I hope you'll choose to share the responsibility with me."

"I... you're asking a lot that I wasn't ready for."

"Yes. And you don't have a lot of time to choose."

They both looked up at the messengers gathered in the air. While Jason and Jali had been talking, so had they.

"I think they're picking someone to come and talk to us," Jason said. Proving him right, two of the messengers broke off and started floating downwards.

"Alright team," Jason said. "Let's not spook the hopefully nice baby angels."

Shade disappeared into the void of Jason's cloak, Colin dissolved into a blood mist that Jason absorbed and Gordon just vanished, Jason's aura pulsing as he did. Jason looked at Jali.

"I'll stay," she told him.

"Good. Now just try and look like you know what you're doing."

"I don't know what I'm doing."

"Which is when looking like you do is most important."

Jali floated to Jason's right and they hovered side by side to meet the pair of descending messengers. Jason pushed his hood back to show his face.

The messengers hovered in front of them, wings extended like Jali's. Jason's cloak floated out to his sides like the celestial wings of a star phoenix. The messenger pair showed no trace of elemental taint and wore diaphanous robes apparently conjured up by the transformation zone. One was female, with long dark hair, while the other was a sandy-haired male. Both had the statuesque proportions and exquisite features common to messengers. They glanced at Jali before locking their gazes on Jason.

"You are the ruler of this place," the female messenger said.

"I am," Jason said. "My name is Jason Asano."

"I... I should have a name," the female messenger said, her expression breaking into confusion and fear. "I can feel that I should have a name, but something is wrong."

"There is much you don't know," Jason said. "Yes, something has gone wrong and I know you have many questions. We have the answers you need."

The two messengers looked at him with a mixture of wariness and hope.

"You are right that you should have a name," Jali said.

"Then why don't we?" the male messenger asked.

"We'll go through everything," Jason told them. "Some of it will be hard to hear, but we can answer your questions, and we will. But I think we should tell all of you together."

He glanced up then back at the main messenger group, far above them, then back to the two in front of him. They shrank back, their nervousness almost startling coming from messengers.

“If you were hostile,” the female messenger said, “is there any place we could run from you?”

“Perhaps,” Jason said. “There are many territories in this realm and, for now, I only possess this one.”

“We were going to belong to it,” she said. “To you. We could feel your influence being imprinted upon us, but then it stopped.”

“I apologise for that experience,” Jason said. “It is an unfortunate interaction between the nature of this place, the nature of your kind and the circumstances that brought all this about. I will explain it all. For now, just know that I intervened because I do not own people. I made sure that I have no intrinsic hold on you.”

“He has helped me in a similar way,” Jali said. “I was slave to another and he freed me, as he has freed you.”

“Yet you serve him?” the man asked.

“I... stand by him,” Jali said, prompting a sideways glance from Jason. “That is my choice.”

The woman continued staring at Jason.

“You are not of our kind,” she told him. “Yet, I feel something from you. When we awoke, there was an instinct to kneel. To acknowledge ourselves as less than you. But what you did, what you changed, it altered that instinct as well. I sense your power, but I’m no longer driven to obey it.”

“Good,” Jason said. “As I already told you, I don’t own people. It’s a personal policy that’s caused me more problems than it really should.”

He gestured to Jali.

“This is Jali Corrik Fen. I hope you will collect your people and wait with her while I go deal with some of the others who share this space with us. Then we can have a nice long talk.”