

Chapter 698

The Foolish Choice

Inside Jason's astral realm, Marek Nior Vargas was walking with his friend and companion, Payan Nior Roel. Having bloomed in the same district of the same garden world, they had known each other for all but the first few days of their lives. They had served under the same commander, who had helped break their indoctrination. They had confided their doubts in one another and secretly sought out the Unorthodoxy together.

"We need to leave this place," Payan said, far from the first time.

"And I am asking you to wait," Marek said patiently. "Again. And I have been asking him to release us, but really I am laying a foundation for the relationship. It's going to take time for him to see us as anything other than superiority-obsessed zealots."

"We're free of the astral kings, except we're trapped in the astral kingdom of this one. Do you not realise what the revelation of not needing astral kings to survive will mean? Let alone that the astral kings have been imposing the limits on us while claiming they were natural."

"I do realise what it means," Marek said. "It means that our deaths will come extremely fast if we are not extremely careful. And while we can demonstrate our freedom simply by existing, we have no proof that the kings are limiting us. The astral kings will call us liars and aberrations."

"But that isn't true. Our people will see that."

"People will choose what they want to be true over what is, given even the flimsiest excuse."

"The servant races, yes, but we are talking about messengers."

"You shouldn't call them servant races, Payan. Not only will our host not like it – and there is no place we can hide from him here – but think about the revelations we have just learned. The reality is, Payan, that we are the true servant race."

"Which is why we need to get out there and start changing things."

"Which we will, but I think you've failed to realise that the most important gift that our freedom gives us is time. Time to hide. Time to plan, prepare and gather resources. No Voice of the Will to answer to. No astral king spying on our souls. That means we can finally hide. We've never had that before."

"And you would hide in a prison?"

"Yes, I would. Don't squander this chance, Payan. This astral kingdom is tiny and incomplete; it's more of an astral estate. When will you ever get another chance to see an

astral kingdom as a work in progress? You should take it all in, learn as much as you can and be grateful for the time you get to spend here. This time will pay itself back a thousandfold when we are seeking to construct our own astral kingdoms. Think of Mah Go Schaat, cloistered away in his study. How many centuries had he spent chasing rumours that would give him a fragment of what is all around us."

"But what does Asano want of us while we are here? What is his agenda?"

"You have already given Asano your trust, Payan. You let him into your soul."

"Against every instinct screaming at me not to. If the alternative was anything but death, I don't know that I could have. Pios Val Haat couldn't, even then, and it killed her."

"Yet, all he did was free us, when he could have made us slaves. He did not even leave himself a way back into our souls, which he equally could have. He had no need for schemes because we were perfectly vulnerable and he had all the power. What could he have done that showed his lack of ill-intent more clearly than that? I'm actually asking because I cannot think of anything."

"But that's the issue, isn't it? He's made it clear that he sees us as enemies. You think he wants to play us against the astral kings?"

"I think he does now, after I've put the idea in his head."

"Then why did he help us?"

"I don't know. When I was trying to convince him, asking for mercy felt... wrong. I haven't thrown off the superiority doctrine as thoroughly as I like to tell myself. But I saw Tera Jun Casta who, by all rights, should have been dead. And I saw Asano, exhausted from the effort of circumventing a duel power, which shouldn't be possible. He should have killed her. Could have killed her. He had the power and she was an enemy. Why he made that choice, I don't know. But it feels important that I find out."

"Then perhaps," Payan said, "you should ask him."

"I hate that shadow," Charist said. He and his fellow diamond-rank adventurer, Allayeth, had just come from Asano's cloud palace. Again. Asano's familiar had politely told them that he would inform Asano of their 'request' as soon as he was able. They had returned to the Adventure Society's main building, one of the few that was essentially intact in the wake of the raid, taking tea in a private parlour.

"I told you that we shouldn't have broken into the cloud palace," Allayeth said. "He wasn't in there and it only made things worse. The High Priestess of the Healer has filed multiple formal complaints to the Adventure Society."

"We're diamond-rankers, what do we care?"

“We decided to stay here for some time, Charist. The people of this city love Hana Shavar, as does the Healer. Causing her trouble is trouble for us. Unless you’re looking to rule with an iron fist, we can’t just squash the city authorities.”

Charist’s face took on a contemplative expression. Allayeth saw it and groaned.

“No,” she told him. “We are not going to rule with an iron fist.”

“You’re the one who brought it up.”

She gave him a flat look.

“Fine,” he reluctantly acceded. “But I won’t have this Asano running over us the way I’m apparently not allowed to with the city’s precious authority figures.”

“He is a concern. Have you read the testimonies from the people in that bunker?”

“You mean where he tells the messenger to give up her soul and it looks like she does? Clearly, Asano is someone who needs to be brought to heel.”

“No,” Allayeth said. “I spoke to Soramir Rimaros again this morning. He said that force is a very bad idea.”

“Well, we’re not in the Storm Kingdom. We don’t have any places named after Soramir Rimaros down here.”

“Actually, there’s a trade town just upriver called Rimarino that—”

“Are you kidding me?”

There was an aura pulse from behind the door and Allayeth responded in kind. An Adventure Society functionary came in.

“It’s time?” Allayeth asked.

“They should be portalling in six minutes from now,” the functionary said.

“I can’t believe it’s come to this,” Charist muttered as he rose from his chair.

“If it worked in Rimaros, it should work here,” Allayeth told him.

In a city far to the north of the Storm Kingdom, Rick Gellar was dressing up.

“They’re treating me like a translator that speaks Asano,” he complained. “This is a steaming pile of heidel shi—”

“Diplomacy, Rickard,” Hannah told him as she adjusted his collar. “We’re about to meet with diamond-rankers.”

“Oh, so now it’s Rickard. I know you were the one who told the protocol officer at the royal palace in Rimaros that my name was Richard.”

“And I know that you won’t stop talking about how Asano is always surrounded by beautiful women whenever you get near him.”

“Said like someone who didn’t have her own little crush.”

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Hannah said airily.

They walked out of their bedroom in the Geller family compound and made for the teleport zone where the compound's defences wouldn't interfere with a portal. With a sizeable messenger stronghold not too far away, the compound was always on low-level alert. Dimensional interference was normally too expensive to leave running, but the compound leveraged peculiarities of the local magic to make it work.

The rest of Rick's team joined him and Hannah on the way. Phoebe Geller was Rick's sister, now back in his team, and Claire was Hannah's twin. The last member of the team was Dustin Kettering, the only non-local. They had picked him up in Greenstone after their original fifth, Jonah Geller was killed during a failed star seed extraction. Dustin had been on a team with Neil Davone and Thadwick Mercer, who had disbanded the team while also under star seed influence.

"We're barely back from Rimaros and now we're going south again," Claire complained.

"I didn't get to go last time," Phoebe said, "so I'm looking forward to it. It will be nice to see how Sophie is coming along."

"I'm looking forward to seeing Neil again," Dustin said. "Also, being somewhere less dusty. None of you warned me that they call this region the dust basin. It's easy to get magic that shrugs off humidity, but for dust, you have that annoying air magic blowing over you the whole time."

"That's why I told you not to buy the cheap anti-dust bracelet," Claire told him.

"I'm not going to pay that much money for—"

"Work faces on," Rick interrupted as he led them through the door and into the courtyard they would be portalling from. The gold ranker, his aunt, gave him a wink as she opened the portal. This involved a gelatinous blob appearing that swiftly expanded into a ring shape, floating in the air. The space in the middle of the ring filled with green glowing energy.

Inside Jason's astral realm, Marek was explaining what he knew of Jes Fin Kaal's intentions to Jason and his team. They were in a grassy area, splayed out in lounge chairs. The two exceptions were Marek, floating just off the ground at the front, and Gary, grilling meat at the back. The smell of grilling meat wafted over the team.

"The astral king is after something buried deep underground," Marek explained. "She has known about it for decades, which is why she had the naga genesis egg placed here. I suspect the astral king will not be happy about the Voice expending so many resources on

the Yaresh raid, but I could just as easily be wrong. Astral kings are known for massive expenditures when they want something.”

“And what is it that they want, exactly?” Humphrey asked.

“I don’t know,” Marek said. “But I think your goddess of Knowledge does. She’s been building forces up here for years, which is the only reason we didn’t wipe out Yaresh on our arrival.”

“It’s something to do with the natural array, isn’t it?” Clive asked.

“I believe so,” Marek said.

“Can somebody explain what that is again?” Sophie asked. “The last time we were meant to be briefed, Clive threw a tantrum and stormed off.”

“It was not a tantrum,” Clive said. “But ignoring that, a natural array is a magical array – a permanently emplaced ritual – except it occurs naturally instead of being crafted through ritual magic. The elements that make it up are essences, awakening stones and quintessence that have manifested normally over decades or even centuries. They just happen to have manifested in exactly the right proximity and arrangement that their magical energy interacts to produce a ritual-like effect.”

“That can’t be common,” Sophie said.

“It’s breathtakingly rare,” Clive agreed. “Magic Society researchers have murdered one another over the chance to study one. Not does every element need to be positioned excruciating precision, but it must do so without being interfered with in the many years it takes the natural array to form.”

“And being made up of valuable materials,” Belinda said, “anyone that finds it will plunder it.”

“It got away with it here by all the bits appearing deep underground?” Neil asked.

“Exactly,” Clive said. “The essences, stones and quintessence that make up the array will be what you’d expect from manifestations that far underground. Earth, fire and iron will make up the vast majority, I imagine.”

“The astral king knew of its existence,” Marek said. “I do not know how, when even the elf city almost on top of it was oblivious. The original intention had been to conduct a mining operation and excavate down, setting off the naga genesis egg in the city if they discovered the operation. But obstacles arose and things became significantly more complicated.”

“Complicated how?” Humphrey asked.

“We were expecting an array buried in solid earth, doing whatever it was doing. What we found was a subterranean city centred around it, with a population that had been there

for centuries. What's more, there is an astral space down there that the Builder cult somehow managed to find and occupy. They've been fighting the locals ever since. When our forces arrived, not only did we find ourselves stumbling into what was now a three-way war but Knowledge's army was waiting to strike from behind. Even worse, the effects of the array were impacting our forces. We were forced to withdraw with considerable losses."

"I have heard the early stages of the conflict went poorly for the messengers," Humphrey said.

"Yes. Significant reinforcements were sent by the astral king. That was when I arrived with my people. We set up the strongholds, but aside from the various factions in the conflict, there was another major impediment. The nature of the array seems to imbue individuals with elemental magic."

"And what does imbuing people with magic do?" Belinda asked.

"Those living down there were smoulder," Marek said. "That makes sense as they have strong earth and fire affinities. They are an essence-using people, but those who live there now are not. Centuries of exposure have turned them into a more magical sub-species. They can no longer use essences, but their inherent powers have grown considerably."

"There are other cases like that," Clive said. "Moonstalker Elves. Thunder King Leonids."

"The subterranean residents have adapted well," Marek continued. "Those who already have high levels of inherent magic are less positively affected. The messengers sent down swiftly started mutating into elemental variants."

"I bet that went down great with team 'we are the superior race,'" Neil said.

"It did not," Marek agreed. "Especially as the changes cause intelligence to rapidly and precipitously devolve. Most of the initial force of silver-rankers were lost and even some of the golds failed to escape before being affected."

"And that's when you started suborning essence users," Jason said.

"Yes," Marek confirmed. "We discovered that essences users and the Builder's converted are both resistant to the effects. Not immune, but there was no concern on our part for casualties amongst the..."

"Say it," Jason told him.

"...servant races," Marek continued. "There were a number of problems, however. One was that our efforts to recruit and suborn essence users were not resulting in the numbers we required. The other was that the main component of successfully resisting the

array's effects, at least amongst essence users, was willpower. That, as it turns out, is something that those willing to serve us tend to lack."

"No surprise there," Taika said. "That bloke you all sent after Jason tried to get me onside. His arguments sucked, bro."

"That was when the stalemate with the local forces settled in. We had our fortresses, with the Knowledge army and Adventure Society war camps pressuring them. We also had to periodically deal with incursions from below, through the very access shafts we had dug."

"You had dug?" Jason asked pointedly.

"That our slaves had dug," Marek corrected. "To end the stalemate, the astral king sent Jes Fin Kaal. She is a Voice of the Will, one of the astral king's personal servants, imbued with a portion of her power. She did not come to fight, however, but to plan. She brought the world-taker worms and the infested proved resistant to the array's effects."

"They weren't meant to be an invasion force?" Rufus asked.

"Something important to understand about Jes Fin Kaal is that she never does anything for just one reason. Every resource has an alternative use. Every plan has contingencies and synergies; every objective has alternatives. When something goes wrong, she adapts, turning adversity into opportunity. You, Asano, are the perfect example. She wants to use you, and she is keeping her options open as to how."

"She must have gotten a surprise when you sold out instead of capturing him, then," Neil said.

"No," Marek said. "Her orders to the silver-rankers were to kill him, so as to prove his worth to the rank and file messengers. His actions during the raid more than accomplished this. The gold-rankers were under orders to capture Asano if possible, and leave him alive and free if not. She does not need you captured, Asano. She believes she can get what she wants from you without forcing you into it."

"How?" Jason asked. "And what does she want from me?"

"She will attempt to use you to retrieve whatever it is she wants from the subterranean city. I suspect she will make an enticing offer to secure your participation. With you ostensibly in command of an essence user force, she can make it work. She will, of course, have plans contingent upon your refusal as well as your acceptance."

"Why me? The astral king thing?"

"Yes. The indoctrination of my kind excels at instilling obedience, but it does have its drawbacks from a control perspective. My kind are unwilling to work with what they see as their lesser. Any attempt at collaboration inevitably descends into abuse for the sake of

amusement. If they are going to work with essence users, there needs to be an essence user they acknowledge. She was going to have you prove yourself in a duel, which would hopefully demonstrate your astral king nature. Your aura displays during the raid served her purpose far better than she could have hoped."

"She's going to send someone to make an offer," Jason said.

"Yes. Most likely, she will approach the city itself, rather than you directly. Leverage their influence to pressure you into action."

"That's idiotic," Sophie said. "The city is already pressuring him, and it's getting them nowhere."

"That's because what they want right now is control," Jason said. "They want the messengers I have and to know whatever they think I know that they don't. That's easy to refuse. But what if they want something that will help the city? The people? Civic authority holds minimal leverage over me. Moral authority is harder to resist."

"Jes Fin Kaal must meet the needs of the astral king," Marek said. "It is the only time you can find her acting on a single objective because she has no choice. It's the only condition under which she becomes predictable. I promise you that whatever she offers the city, it will be hard for you to refuse."

"And the astral king wants the natural array?" Clive asked.

"There is something else down there she wants," Marek said. "I know that it is *not* the array, nor the elements that make it up. Whatever it is, the astral king wants it very badly."

"The messengers are here for Purity's legacy," Jason said. "Is that down there? It would be quite the hiding spot."

"No," Marek said. "This is something the astral king wants for herself, to the point of letting the other kings vie over the Purity relic. I don't know what, but everything else is secondary to her."

"Then all Jason has to do is say no," Sophie said. "Plan stopped."

"Plan altered," Jason corrected. "I don't think this Jes Fin Kaal will move forward with an absolute failure point in her plan, especially such a predictable one."

"Then we go along?" Humphrey asked. "It seems that if we want to have the ability to influence events, we need to be part of them."

"To put out an idea that no one seems to have considered," Rufus said, "Have we considered actually going along with the diamond-rankers? Telling them what we know and giving them what we have? They are on our side."

Dark clouds started gathering in the sky above them.

“I’ve tried working with the organisations on my side before,” Jason said, his voice rumbling with the echo of thunder.

“That is a no, then,” Rufus said. “I just thought I’d ask.”

Marek and Jason were on a balcony on the pagoda tower at the heart of Jason’s astral realm, looking out over the gardens and buildings. Jason was leaning casually against the rail while Marek was upright, floating just off the floor. The grounds in front of them shifted and changed in a constant state of flux. Buildings grew larger or smaller, disappearing or new ones suddenly being there. The flowers in the gardens changed colours and the pathways and streams shifted location.

Marek never noticed any of it happening. He would simply realise the difference without having seen it change. He was looking right at it and yet failed to perceive it, his senses lying to him that it had always been that way.

“Why are you helping us?” Marek asked. “Why was asking for mercy what convinced you, when the sensible choice was to use us? To hand us over to the rulers of Yaresh.”

“I might still do that.”

“I don’t think you will, but I don’t understand why not. And I feel like it is somehow important that I should.”

Jason turned to look at Marek. He didn’t speak for a long time as he stared at the messenger. Finally, he turned his gaze back out the grounds.

“When I first started to realise that I was more powerful than I was moral,” Jason said, “I asked my father for advice.”

“Is your father a powerful man?”

“No. What he told me was that when I have someone at my mercy, and I’m faced with the choice between ending them or not, that is a chance to decide who I am.”

“The wise decision is to kill your enemies unless you need them for something. Kill the root and the plant will not grow again.”

“The wise decision, you say. I think that depends on the kind of wisdom you’re talking about. But I did make your wise choice. Or rather, I just killed and didn’t even think of it as a choice. I don’t know why it was different with that messenger girl. She wasn’t different, not really. A little young, but definitely not innocent. But for some reason, that was the moment. I’ve been thinking about what my dad told me, lately, and that was the moment I decided to listen.”

Jason ran a hand over his face, took a deep breath and let it out in a slow sigh.

“Maybe it was just because I’m contrary by nature,” he continued. “Mercy was the hard path and I don’t know how to take the easy one anymore. Everything pointed to killing her, and for whatever reason, I decided I wouldn’t. It’s not like I’m a good man; that ship sailed far too many corpses ago.”

“We each have our values,” Marek said. “Yours and mine are quite different, but we both, I think, lament our failures to live up to them.”

Jason nodded.

“I don’t even know if what I did to her was mercy. I might not know even after she wakes up. I may have destroyed her more horribly than death could have, but that might not show itself for months or even years. There’s no fully predicting damage of the mind. But I hope I did right. I can’t tell anymore, and I’m not sure I was right when I thought I could.”

“Then why try?” Marek asked. “Why make a fool’s choice you can’t be certain of instead of the smart choice you can confirm?”

“Because I’ve been down what you call the smart choice, and I do mean down. It only gets darker the longer you walk it. Making things worse and getting what you want out of that is easy. Making things better is hard and often uncertain. And yes, it means making the fool’s choice. It’s harder and you might get it wrong. But if no one dares to be a fool, then all there will end up being is darkness. I’m sick of darkness, and I like being a fool, so that’s what I’m going to be.”

“You do not think anything like my people.”

“Your people could stand to think more like me, from time to time.”

“I think you are right. I see now, I think. It is aspirational, yes? You want to make the foolish choice the right one, even if that always means taking the harder path. I too have a hard path if I want to save my people. To redeem them.”

“Then I wish you success. But you should know that it will be even worse than you think. Sometimes, the world will try to break you. Either you have to bend, or you make the world bend.”

“Bend the world? If that is your goal, you will need almost inconceivable power.”

Jason smiled and Marek’s gaze moved from the silver-ranker to his astral kingdom laid out before them.

“I may have just started to understand you, Jason Asano.”