

## Chapter 699

### Aftermath

Messengers didn't dream. They understood the concept, but it wasn't something they experienced for themselves. It was a condition of lesser beings. Of the weak. This was what the messenger Tera Jun Casta had been told her entire life, which left her confused as she roused from dreams of her own. She didn't remember them, skittering away like spectres in the night, but it felt like she had been living them for an extremely long time.

She opened her eyes to see an unfamiliar ceiling. It was dark crystal with swirling gold, silver and blue sparks within as if filled with viscous fluid and expensive glitter. She was in a bed made of fluffy white cloud-material, which was comfortable with her wings. Her armour, once torn to shreds, was now whole.

There was no sign at all, in fact, of the fight that was the last thing she remembered. Her armour was repaired and the injuries were gone, as was the blood they had painted her with. What remained was the bitter sense of defeat, not in that she had lost the fight but that she had accepted the loss before the fight was over. Her thoughts had turned, in desperation, to using the people in the bunker as hostages. The soul barriers around her and Asano would have killed any normal-rankers they touched.

Thinking of her power spiked her confusion. Once her power was enacted, either one or both people would die. Yet here she was, and Asano's survival was obvious. She could sense the singular will dominating her surroundings; the aura that pervaded every scrap of matter. It was an astral kingdom, and while this was only her second time being inside one, there was no mistaking it. There was also no mistaking who it belonged to. She instinctively knew it was Jason Asano, the man she did not even remember losing to, and her certainty went beyond just recognising the aura. She felt a familiarity with Asano that she could not explain but felt unsettlingly intimate.

She had no idea how the fight had ended. She had flashes that didn't make any sense, as fleeting as the remnants of her newfound dreams. She needed more information and sat up, shifting her legs off the bed. The cloud bed accommodated her, altering itself as if in response to her desire and transforming into a chair. She remained seated for the moment and looked around.

The room she was in was large, more a luxurious suite than the cell she would have expected. The furniture varied from elegant wood to plush cloud-material, and it was very spacious. There was a low set of drawers against the wall, atop which was what looked to

be an array of baked goods on plates under glass display domes. The windows showed gardens outside, with blood-red flowers on thorny green stems.

There were two ways out; doorways with no doors, but only veils of mist. One was in the wall and the other was a circle occupying the ceiling in the style of messenger architecture. The room did not seem at all designed to keep her contained, but she realised it didn't need to. There was no escaping an astral kingdom; you stayed until the king allowed you to leave. Perhaps there was some leeway, given that Asano was only silver-rank, but she doubted it. Even a gold-rank fish was not mightier than the silver-rank ocean in which it swam.

How she ended up in an astral kingdom without consenting to pass through the portal she did not know, and that was just the beginning of her confusion. She felt different, unsure how long she had been unconscious. She was about to assess herself with her senses when a voice came down through the door in the ceiling.

"Tera Jun Casta," the male voice called out. "I am told that you are awake."

It wasn't Asano's voice, but she thought she recognised it. Her senses failed to escape the walls to probe further.

"Who are you?" she called out.

"Marek Nior Vargas."

The commander. Tera was only a loose addition to the forces Marek commanded in the raid on Yaresh, and not one that would garner the commander's individual attention. Messengers unable to advance beyond silver were to be pitied, with only everything in the cosmos other than messengers being more lowly.

Tera realised that she was caught up in her thoughts and had not responded.

"Commander," she said, looking up at the misty ceiling. Through it, she could only see a winged silhouette. "I do not know how to let you in. Or if I can get out."

"Do I have permission to enter?" he asked, startling her.

"You don't have to ask, Commander."

He descended through the veil slowly as she stood up, hovering just off the floor. She noted that he didn't remain floating, his feet settling on the floor. He was wearing light armour like her and stood slightly shorter, especially as she was floating in the air. His wings with their subdued plumage folded tight on his back as he looked at her with eyes as sharp as his handsome features.

She knew him only by reputation and what she had seen in battle herself. In both cases, protectiveness was his most well-known trait, followed by careful tactics and

conservative strategies, contrasted with sudden moments of bold action. Many counted him as an ideal messenger, while others considered him fearful and weak.

During the raid, Tera had seen for herself as Marek prioritised keeping not just his own troop safe but all the messengers under his command as well. She felt the sting of shame as she remembered throwing away his efforts and charging after Asano in a reckless fervour. If he was here with her, he most likely had placed himself in danger to protect the many who, like her, had disobeyed his orders.

“You were captured as well,” she said sadly. To her surprise, an awkward smile crossed his face that shattered the image of stern commander and showed the man behind it.

“It’s complicated,” he said. “A lot has happened, and I imagine your memories of the battle’s end are scattered at best.”

Tera nodded.

“I have many questions, Commander, but there is no need for you to—”

“Waking up in this place must be disorienting, and there is much you have yet to understand. Even about yourself, I see. Come fly with me, Tera Jun Casta.”

Without waiting for a response, he floated up through the misty door. As she pushed more strength into her aura to lift herself, she discovered that more than simply feeling strange after awakening, her aura had undergone a permanent change. Startled, she dropped to the floor.

“Do not rush,” Marek’s voice came from outside. “You have only just awoken from a lengthy slumber to find everything has changed. We have an abundance of time, so take as much of it as you need.”

“I cannot make you wait on me, Commander.”

“Yes, you can. Look inward before you look out, Tera Jun Casta. That’s an order. I will be here for your questions when you are done.”

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“Jason,” Humphrey said, “the longer you refuse to meet with the diamond-rankers and the Adventure Society, the worse they are going to make things for you once you do finally leave your soul realm.”

Humphrey and Jason were sitting on lawn chairs, taking drinks. Amongst the gardens sprawled around them, Rufus and Sophie were sparring with a half-dozen copies of Jason. More copies of Jason were duelling one another, floating in cross-legged meditation, reading or going through dance-like weapon forms.

"Humphrey, they broke into my home, rummaged through for the things they wanted and left. They may have only taken Taika's imprisoned messenger, but if any of us had been there, they would have taken them as well. Most likely Sophie's mother, too, if it had come to that. And the cloud palace is a hospital, for the moment. They were highly disruptive."

"I'm not denying you hold the moral high ground, Jason," Humphrey told him. "They should never have barged into the cloud palace. And I know that flaunting political reality is kind of your thing. But I'm asking you to think back to what that has gotten you over the years, and what it will get us all in the years to come. I don't want the Adventure Society giving us problems every day until we reach gold-rank."

Jason nodded.

"I still let my pride get the better of me, don't I?" he asked. "But I'm going back out today. It would appear the Adventure Society here have taken the same approach as the Rimaros branch did to my seclusion. They found an ambassador."

"They used Rick in Rimaros," Humphrey said. "Who are they sending to talk to you here?"

Jason's eyes sparkled.

"Rick again. The locals lack imagination, it would seem."

"Rick went north after the monster surge."

"And I sensed them portal him in less than an hour ago."

Humphrey let out a sigh.

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Marek waited in the shadow of the massive dome containing the cocoon that loomed taller than most of the buildings in Asano's astral kingdom. In the weeks he had been present, the cocoon building had, like much of the territory, undergone large changes. Sometimes he watched them, sometimes he didn't perceive them at all, as if time had skipped and suddenly a building was gone. Asano's realm was in a constant state of flux, with only a handful of places remaining static. The pagoda tower at the centre was one, as was the forge where the leonid, Gary, practised his weapon-smithing.

Marek had given the man a wide berth as he was not friendly to the messengers. He had killed no small number of Marek's kind during the raid and seen them kill civilians in turn. One of Marek's people had let pride rule his head and accosted the leonid, only surviving through Asano all but rebuilding his body from scratch.

Marek's most unruly subordinate was Mari Gah Rahnd, and Marek tried to find her before she went after the leonid for fun. Asano, inevitably, found her first, delivering her to

Marek to look after. A few days later, Asano gave her mouth, arms, legs and wings back to her.

Asano seemed to have an astral king's instinctive understanding of how messengers worked, the punishment he delivered was exactly what Marek would expect from any astral king. Asano could remould their bodies despite not being one of them, or even a complete astral king. He lacked the third part of the astral throne, astral gate and soul forge trifecta, an absence that got Marek thinking.

The astral king Marek had, until recently, served was Vesta Carmis Zell. Marek did not know her exact agenda, but he could make certain guesses. Zell was known for her fascination with soul engineering. It was an uncommon practice as tools were almost impossible to find and raw materials even more so. She and her chief agent, Jes Fin Kaal, were after something deep underground, and a soul forge would explain the absurd resources expended to obtain it. Marek was no soul engineer himself, but he knew that a second forge was something that astral kings who were deeply coveted.

Marek shook his head, clearing out his latest postulation. With little to do for weeks, his mind was running through one possibility after another, Without the power to leave, he neither had nor could obtain the evidence to confirm or disconfirm any of them. He was better off planning what he and his people would do once Asano let them go. He was confident now that Asano wouldn't just hand them over to the Adventure Society, although that wasn't the same as releasing them.

Marek watched as the cocoon dome started rising from the ground, revealing itself as a giant sphere that floated away through the sky. He wondered how much the shifting nature of the space was due to Asano's proclivities and how much was instability from his lack of a soul forge.

He was still watching it when Tera rose through the misty door, her expression a mix of concern, confusion and the tiniest bit of hope.

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Rick and his team were sobered by the aftermath of the Battle of Yaresh as they flew over the city. They were riding in an open-top flying carriage as blackened flatland passed under them. Magic could rebuild destroyed infrastructure with startling speed, so the city being little more than rubble two weeks after the battle told a bleak story. Only tiny pockets of reconstruction were scattered across the city, the beginnings of what would come next. Given that Yaresh had been a city where most of the buildings had been made through the shaping of living trees, it would be a lengthy process of recovery. A few trees were already starting to grow in the bleak landscape, but there was such a long way to go.

In most places, recovery meant clearing enough room for whole districts of temporary housing, be it tents or rough buildings shaped with hasty magic. These places hadn't even started recovery, simply being attempts to survive.

"Most of the population is still living in the bunkers," Vidal Ladiv explained. He was the Adventure Society's official liaison with Team Biscuit, although he always seemed to find himself conveniently forgotten. Attached to the team in Rimaros, he had been 'accidentally' left behind in no less than three towns between Rimaros and Yaresh.

During the raid, Vidal had not been fighting with Jason and the others but evacuating people from the riverside districts. His water essence and expertise in administration and logistics had made him a valuable asset there, although he couldn't help but feel fobbed-off again.

The local Adventure Society had not been happy with Vidal's inability to get Jason to fall in line, although the letter he showed the local branch director had helped. Signed by both the Rimaros branch director and Soramir Rimaros himself, it detailed some of the difficulties in dealing with Jason Asano and suggestions against provoking him.

It didn't entirely surprise Vidal when the diamond-rankers ignored this and smashed their way into Asano's cloud palace, coming out with only one messenger and a raft of complaints. With the Church of the Healer and other organisations using the building as a hospital at the time, this inevitably led to formal protests to the Adventure Society about diamond-rankers causing chaos.

They rode through the air in silence, Rick and his team looking out in dismay. The area that had once been a giant parking lot for adventurers' vehicles was one of the more intact zones in the city, behind only key infrastructure that had secondary defence systems. Those additional defences were how the Adventure Society and Magic Society campuses, along with the ducal palace, all remained essentially intact.

The area with the adventurer vehicles did have one bombed-out area, where the original refugee camp had been. People evacuated from towns to the south overrun by worms had stayed there until the attack on the city, at which point they had bunkered down in Jason and Emir's cloud palaces. Now that area was once again covered in tents. As for the vehicles themselves, many showed scars from the messenger raids, but the district had held out, fending off the messengers.

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"We're confident that the diamond-rankers won't go barging into the cloud palace again, the moment you leave your soul realm?" Neil asked Jason.

They were standing in a courtyard near the central pagoda of Jason's soul realm. Along with Humphrey and Sophie, the four of them were the greeting party for Rick and his team.

"They won't," Humphrey said. "Even if diamond-rankers don't need to care what people think of them, they still do. They operate in this city, and while they can endure a bad reputation, it complicates things for them. Not only is going after a silver-ranker a second time heavy-handed but it means that they didn't get what they wanted the last time they went after him. Going in again makes them look both tyrannical and weak at the same time."

Jason opened a portal to the world outside and they stepped through.

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Jason's cloud palace was buzzing with activity as the carriage set down on the roof. The roof itself was clear but looking over the roof's edge they saw people filing in and out of the building. Once they took the elevating platform inside they found a hubbub of chaos barely kept in order by a panoply of clergy and Asano's spooky one-eyed avatars, looking like alien creatures draped in void cloaks.

"Asano's cloud palace was used as a hospital after the attack and still is," Vidal explained as they shouldered their way through a crowded hallway. "But now it serves more as a processing centre. We make sure that everyone gets a hot shower and a hot meal before going to their assigned accommodation, which is usually just a tent or a stone-shaped building or the like. We also make sure that no unpleasant surprises have been left behind inside people. We were in the midst of dealing with body-controlling parasites when the attack began."

Vidal led them to a lounge room that was only medium-sized, but they had seen the premium on space in the building. Shortly after they arrived, a portal opened up to admit Jason, Humphrey, Sophie and Neil.

Greetings were made all around. Neil and Dustin from Rick's team were childhood friends. Phoebe had been instrumental in Sophie's initial training back in Greenstone, both of them being pugilists. She also hadn't seen Jason since Greenstone, as she'd been occupied when Rick's team travelled to Rimaros. As for Rick himself, he was looking around as if something was missing.

"What's wrong?" Jason asked him.

"Where's the small army of beautiful women?"

"What are you talking about?" Jason asked as Rick's team member and girlfriend Hannah thumped him on the bicep.

"It's a little strange not seeing you surrounded by gorgeous women."

"Well, there's Sophie, Phoebe and the lovely Adeah twins," Jason said. "Is that not enough for you?"

"Yes, Rickard," Hannah said in a voice sharp enough to slice vegetables. "Is that not enough."

"I'm just saying that there's usually a gaggle of women I've never seen before when I see you."

Jason shook his head.

"Rick, you need to get over this. I'm not always..."

Jason trailed off, turning to frown at the door.

"Yeah, I have to pop out real quick," he said as Shade rose from his shadow for Jason to step into and vanish."

"The diamond-rankers again?" Humphrey guessed.

"No," Neil said, walking over to the door. "He'd have gone back to his soul realm if it was that."

There was a knock at the door and Neil opened it. On the other side was a priestess in the full robes of the Church of Fertility, with a cluster of young female acolytes behind her.

"Sorry," she said. "My god told me that Jason Asano was in here."