

Chapter 650

Even Though You Fear

The round building was like a silo; wide, high and round, without any internal structures. Standing in the middle of it, next to a small crystal recording projector, Benella felt tiny. The three powerful beings looming over her, floating in the air on thrones did not help.

Benella had one chance to prove herself still valuable to the messengers. What she had gone with was presenting Jason Asano as a potential threat to the agenda of the messengers, which was a risky play. Her initial investigation into him had all stemmed from a chance encounter with him in an obviously fake guise, and an instinctive sense that he was dangerous. The more she dug up, however, the more her sense that he was a large problem grew, yet the messengers, as far as she knew, were unaware of him. She managed to hold her nerve as she explained everything she had found, advocating for further investigation into the man. Once she was done, she could only wait like a prisoner about to be sentenced.

Thus far, only the two silver-rank messengers had spoken. Fal Vin Garath was Benella's master, who was abusive but not outside the bounds of acceptability to his fellow messengers. He was free to treat the servant races however he pleased, so long as it did not impinge upon the interests of other messengers.

The other messenger she did not know, although she had seen him moving around the stronghold. He seemed to be of equal status to Fal, while being his physical and temperamental counterpart. Dark skinned and silver-haired, compared to Fal's fair complexion and golden hair, he was composed and civil in his conduct. This was true even to servants, although there was no question that he demanded nothing less than total obedience. But while his tone always carried an implicit warning when speaking to servants, Benella much preferred it to Fal's open threat.

The third messenger, dominant amongst the three, had yet to speak. Jes Fin Kaal had, thus far, allowed the others to ask the questions, although Fal had said little of use. It was the other messenger who seemed to be her primary representative. Fal was about to speak when Kaal made a silencing gesture. Then, for the first time since her arrival, she spoke.

"I am aware that your primary purpose in bringing this information to us is to prove your worth for self-serving reasons," she said, her voice an ominous melody. "This is acceptable, as your goal is to prove yourself a worthy servant. But of all the ways you

could have chosen to approach us, why did you choose this one? You could have brought any number of issues to us. Why is this the one that will show you are an asset to be valued, and not a liability to be excised?”

Benella didn't even consider denying her motivations.

“I...”

She frowned, hesitant. She knew that her next words would be life or death.

“In my ignorance,” she said, “I do not know how to address you.”

The standard mode of address for messengers was lord, be they men, women or androgynous. Benella was aware that Kaal was part of a select group within the messengers, and feared offending her.

“I am Voice Kaal, and you may address me as such.”

Benella neither apologised nor thanked her, being worthy of neither. Fearing that she was subconsciously stalling for time, which Kaal would notice, she steeled her nerves again.

“This is the thing that matters,” Benella said, her voice firming. “Yes, there were many ways to show my value. Many issues I could bring to your attention, but they did not warrant such an approach as this. The leadership amongst the servant races would have been sufficient to address them, and bringing them to you would have been a waste of your time. But this man is someone I suspect will be beyond the ability of the servant races to handle.”

“Did you bring it to the servant leadership?”

“I did.”

“They agreed with your assessment?”

“They agreed that I should present this issue to you personally, Voice Kaal.”

It had taken significant insistence on Benella's part to address the potential threat of Asano. The leadership had many calls on their time and as events were escalating in the stronghold. They had not only refused to look into one silver-rank auxiliary adventurer, but would not even listen long enough to discover why. Benella understood as she was far from the only servant looking to advance themselves with 'important issues for the messengers.' She finally managed to convince someone to allow her to present her case. That way, she would be the one killed for wasting the messengers' time, being neither the first nor the last to meet their end that way.

What Benella was unsure of was why Kaal was so interested in Benella's thought process in reaching that point. Kaal's seat descended partway to the floor and she leaned forward, examining Benella. She could feel the messenger forcefully probing her emotions

with her aura. Could the Voice even read her thoughts? She had heard rumours from other servants, although nothing reliable.

“Why?” Kaal asked again. “Something very specific convinced you that this man should be brought to our attention. I can feel it digging at your insides like a burr. What is it? Why are you afraid of it? It’s not what you found when you looked into him, is it? It’s the thing that made you dig deeper in the first place. For all that you found to support your instinct, it was something at the beginning that convinced you. It drove you to bring it to us, even though you fear what doing so will mean for you.”

Chills ran through Benella's body as the messenger rendered her transparent, seeing through her thoughts and motivations. She bowed her head, knowing she had to answer the question she had fervently hoped would not be asked. It made sense that someone who could see through her like a window would dig it out. Squaring her shoulders, she continued.

“I told Lord Fal that I first gained this man’s attention when I noticed something about him. That the aura mask he gave me reacted unusually.”

“But there is more to it than that,” Kaal deduced, her voice certain. Benella nodded, still not meeting her eyes.

“I felt something from this man. Something like I have never felt from any of the servant races. I have only ever felt it from...”

Benella braced herself, squeezing her eyes closed.

“...from your kind. From messengers.”

Benella felt air wash over her, but nothing else. She opened her eyes to see the dark-skinned messenger's back in front of her, his wings spread out to shield her. Past him, she could see Lord Fal, arrested mid-lunge by a restraining hand on his chest. Fal still had a fist raised, ready to crash down on Benella.

“Return to your seat.”

“This creature just compared one of the lesser races to us,” Fal snarled.

“She was asked a question and answered it honestly,” Kaal said. “If she lied, would you have struck her down for that?”

“Of course.”

“And I am certain this woman knew you would. That she came here, knowing she would likely be asked that question, where both answers carried a death sentence. Yet she came. I will not allow you to kill what may be a surpassing servant. Not yet.”

“How can you tolerate her insolence?” Fal asked in a shout.

“However I see fit. Return to your seat, Fal Vin Garath. I will not tell you a third time.”

Fal openly glared at Kaal but obeyed as he did so, returning to his seat. The other messenger did as well.

“Thank you, Hess Jor Nasala,” Kaal said to him.

Benella was frozen as the two messengers floated back to their chairs. She was at least glad that she had found a name for the third messenger, although she still offered no thanks. He may have saved her life, but all he was safeguarding was her potential value. Her gratitude meant nothing to him.

Kaal rose from her seat, floating past the other as they returned to theirs. She stopped when she reached Benella, looming over her. Benella did not look up to meet her eyes.

“You are a gambler, elf. You have bet your life on the suspicion that this man you have told us of is of sufficient value that we need to investigate, if not intervene ourselves. That you did not take a safer approach to secure a place in our service interests me. What about this man has so shaken you?”

“I know my power to assess is lacking,” Benella said. “I know he is not the match of the gold rankers arrayed against you. But of all the adventurers I’ve ever encountered, this man is the only one my instincts told me was like you. The messengers.”

“Like us?” Fal roared standing up in his seat. “You would compare—”

“Quiet,” Kaal said, her voice soft but with an almost physical power behind it. Fal complied in an instant, sitting back down, although he continued to glower.

“Explain,” Kaal commanded Benella. “How is he like us?”

“I’m not sure exactly how to explain it,” she said. “There is an otherworldliness to him. Beyond anything I’ve felt even from Zolit. Oh, Zolit is—”

“I am familiar with the Zolit project,” Kaal cut her off. “Continue.”

“I’m not sure quite how to say it.”

“Yes you are,” Kaal told her. “You simply fear what will happen when you do.”

Benella nodded her admission.

“This man feels on a level with your kind that goes beyond rank,” she said. “I spoke of otherworldliness, but it was not like what I had felt from other messengers. It’s like he has the same thing that makes you special but...”

Her voice broke, knowing she could well be about to die.

“...even more so.”

“She thinks some lesser being is—”

He was cut off as Kaal turned to look at him and his mouth sealed over, like a wound healing over.

“I have taken your power to speak,” Voice Kaal told him. “What I have left you with is the power to think and the power act. In the future, use them in that order. If I become convinced that your mouth can produce anything worthwhile, I shall return it to you. Until then, I suggest you study the value of silence.”

That her abusive master had been admonished and punished did not make Benella feel better. Fal no longer had a mouth, but the glare in his eyes spoke loudly. He was not happy about being chastised over one of the lesser races, and in front of her, no less. The idea of being shamed in the face of an inferior poured through his eyes as rage, although he was not fool enough to suppress her with his aura. For the moment, the presence of Kaal was keeping Benella safe, but she knew that should she ever be in his power again, she would die. He wouldn't even need an excuse, given her status. If a messenger wanted her dead, it was his right to kill her.

That put all of Benella's hopes on Kaal. She was not only of higher rank than the other messengers in the room but was able to control the very nature of their bodies. She had been the one to erase the mouth from Fal's face. If Benella could become the property of Kaal, Fal could not touch her without cause.

Done with Fal, Kaal turned to the terrified Benella and crouched down, as if approaching a skittish animal. Even so, the robe that was low enough to hide her feet never quite reached low enough to brush the floor.

“You said this man is like us, but more?” Kaal asked softly.

Benella nodded.

“You believe this man is a threat to us.”

“Potentially. I would not presume to equal your judgement, and merely wish to point out that he is out there.”

“And you have seen in him the same thing you see in us?”

“Not exactly,” Benella said. “But there is something there. My instincts screamed at me that he...”

Benella trailed out, having realised what she was about to say before she stopped herself.

“That he what?” Kaal demanded.

“...that he was on the same level as you. Your people, I mean, not you specifically.”

Benella waited for the death blow, but it never came. Then she felt Kaal's presence with her magical senses for the first time. They had been extended gently and she realised it was for her benefit. Despite that gentleness, however, there was an unflinching

imperiousness to it. It was also something different in her aura, compared to the other messengers; a thread of power whose source seemed distant and endless.

“What do you feel?” Kaal asked.

“It's closer to what I felt from Asano,” Benella said. “Not the same, though. It feels like the power inside you is anchored somewhere else, while his... It's as if you possess power, while he *is* power.”

Kaal's eyes widen for just a fleeting moment. Benella would have missed it if Kaal had not been crouched down in front of her. The messenger floated back to her throne and sat down between Fal and Hess.

“You brought this man to our attention, seeking to rise within our servant hierarchy.”

“Yes, Voice Kaal,” she said.

“You had best tend your garden with caution, child. A misstep could see everything you have grown pulled up by the roots and burned to ash.”

Benella wordlessly acknowledged Kaal's guiding words with a nod. She tried to avoid getting excited, realising that she had accomplished her goal. She knew the messengers would sense her relief and joy, and thought for a moment that she saw the tiniest smile tease the corners of Kaal's lips, then told herself she was imagining it.

“Tell us about this man,” she instructed Benella.

Benella gave a jerky nod, her whole body trembling.

“He is travelling under the identity of John Miller,” she said. “He is ostensibly the cook of a team of travelling adventurers. This is an obvious falsehood, as even the short time I had to investigate was sufficient to reveal his true identity. His real name is Jason Asano, an adventurer belonging to that same team to which he is ostensibly an auxiliary. The purpose of the false identity, given its transparency, seems to be to garner less attention after the events in Rimaros surrounding him. It is not a complex identity designed for infiltration.”

She tried to calm herself by keeping her hands busy, giving her attention to the crystal recording projector.

“It was difficult to obtain imagery of Asano, especially on short notice. I did manage to obtain one recording with his appearance, which matches the man I encountered. This is all I could get, as he has an item or ability that interferes with recordings unless he allows them.”

She finished calibrating the projector and pulled out a crystal.

“What I have here is something he did allow, from a meeting that is believed to have been held out in the open for the very purpose of being observed. He is meeting with two

people, both believed to be diamond rankers from outside of this world. One arrived and was taken away later by a third entity. The other spent some time in Rimaros and is believed to be close to Asano. I do not know her identity, but I heard reports that Soramir Rimaros was deferent towards her. Soramir Rimaros is a diamond ranker, and officially, has taken Asano out into the cosmos. This was when I became certain it was right to bring Asano to your attention.”

“When I asked you why you brought this to me,” Kaal said. “Surely this would have been reason enough to offer me, rather than risk angering us.”

Benella clenched her hand in a determined fist before turning from the projector she was setting up to look at Kaal.

“You did not ask for a reason I decided to bring this to you, Voice Kaal. You asked for *the* reason. If I had told you this was it, it would have been a lie.”

Kaal gave a slight nod that Benella would have interpreted as approval if she hadn't known better. Benella slotted the crystal into the projector and an image came up.

“Stop!” Kaal commanded immediately. A startled Benella was only frozen for a moment before she paused the recording. Kaal floated out of her chair to peer closely at the now-still projection.

“You were quite right that this warrants further examination,” Kaal said. “You have done well.”

“What is it?” Fal asked.

Hess Jord Nasala moved closer, also examining the paused projection. It showed Jason, Dawn and Shako sitting in chairs on the lawn in front of Jason's cloud house in Rimaros.

“Who are those people?” Hess asked.

“This will be Asano,” Kaal said, pointing to Jason. “The others are the now-former prime vessels for the World-Phoenix and Zithis Carrow Vayel.”

The other two messengers stirred.

“Why would they be here?” Hess asked. “Are they interfering in our affairs?”

“I doubt directly,” Kaal said. “The great astral beings are more concerned with one another than us, although we cannot be certain when Vayel is involved.”

“We cannot base our activities on doubts and assumptions,” Hess said. “We should investigate this matter further.”

“Agreed,” Kaal said, “but the timing is poor. We are too close to the next stage. Once the assault of Yaresh begins, we can seek this man Asano out more actively.”