

## Chapter 649

### The Face of Insurmountable Power

Messenger architecture was obsessed with circles. Their buildings were circular, as was the pattern in which they were laid out. The wall around each of their strongholds was also a circle. The wall was only ten feet tall, which would hardly even slow down a silver-rank adventurer, but the wall itself was not the obstacle. It was a platform for the powerful defensive screen that tapped into the combination of aura projection and ritual magic used by the messengers.

Benella was unnerved by the ritual magic used by the messengers. Pallimustus had rituals and magical devices that created artificial auras, like aura beacons used for signalling. Compared to what the messengers could do, however, the Magic Society were children playing in the mud. Their ritual magic was able to not just produce artificial auras, but even take on and reproduce actual auras, as well as use them in more sophisticated ways.

The messengers could actively enhance protection arrays with their auras. This improved both offensive and defensive capabilities, and was the key to their success in fending off regular Adventure Society assaults. In addition to the walls around the stronghold, the circular buildings could each serve as a sturdy fort or bunker, depending on their size.

The buildings constructed by the messengers trended large, with a lot of open space. Columns rose from the top of the circular walls, creating a gap between the wall-tops and the conical roofs. The flying creatures often used this gap for entry and exit, although there were also arched double doors. Aside from that, smaller doors were used by servants of what the messengers called the 'lesser races.'

The messengers had a number of strongholds scattered to the west and south of Yaresh, all of which had come under attack multiple times. Each stronghold was made up of round buildings, surrounded by a neatly circular wall. In one such stronghold, Benella was waiting in a large round and almost empty building.

Inside the building were three chairs that would best be described as thrones, which were favoured by the messengers. The backs of the thrones curved in an hourglass shape to accommodate their wings. Benella knew that messengers could absorb their wings into their bodies, having seen them do it herself. They almost always did not, however, although she was unsure as to why.

Amongst the non-messengers like Benella, who had chosen to serve them, the best guess was that the messengers did not want to closely resemble celestines. There was little chance of that, even discounting the wings, as the messengers were around half again as tall as a celestine. Even so, the servants were careful to avoid even the implication. If a messenger thought they were being compared to their 'lessers,' any servant that did so would be annihilated, irrespective of their value.

In the community of servants, rumour and speculation would rapidly spread. This was because the messengers felt no need to explain themselves to those they considered lesser, which was everybody. Their inherent superiority was a key part of their quasi-religious philosophy, which Benella and the other servants tried their best to learn of, despite the messengers having no interest in teaching it.

Benella had found that the messengers' refusal to explain themselves in any instance and on any topic extended to the point of impracticality. All the servants had made mistakes due to a lack of information a messenger could easily have provided. The punishment for these unavoidable failures was always violent, often lethally so.

Benella had seen that the danger level differed from messenger to messenger. Since joining the stronghold full time, she had realised that the messenger she primarily served, Fal Vin Garath, was one of the more erratic. He was more prone to violence, and what exactly would set him off was less predictable, with most servants taking 'everything' as the default assumption.

The need to find a new place for herself was why she was waiting in the large building with the three thrones, which looked tiny in the high open space. The only other thing in the building, other than Benella herself, was a crystal recording projector on a small plinth.

She could no longer go back to Yareh, having been exposed by John Miller or, as she now realised, Jason Asano. She still maintained contact with certain people in the city, and while they were now laying low, she had managed to get the results of enquiries she had already made into John Miller. It took very little to discover Miller's true identity, as he was almost flaunting it. Between the scars, the skills and the team he was attached to, almost any investigation would quickly reveal the truth. Whether he realised it himself or not, Benella knew that Asano was aching to cut loose.

Benella's utility to the messengers as one of their agents inside the city was gone. Gathering information from overheard conversations in the cage fighting arena had only gotten her so far anyway. She had managed to dig out a few useful tidbits from attendees networking and making deals at the fights, but nothing wildly important or revelatory.

Her main value had been in managing Zolit. He would become increasingly unstable without her there to reinforce the right behaviour and administer doses, now that she could no longer return to the city. That problem was no longer hers, however, and the messengers would solve it as they saw fit. They certainly wouldn't bother telling her what was happening.

The presentation Benella was waiting to give was her chance to maintain relevancy to her winged masters. They had no sense of loyalty to those they considered lesser, so any accomplishments in the past had earned her almost nothing. At most, it demonstrated that she was still potentially useful moving forward. If she could show the messengers her value she would be assigned to a new role. If she did not, her best case was being an ordinary stronghold servant. They could easily decide she knew too much and eliminate her as a potential liability.

Benella's most recent results had been extremely patchy. Things had gone wrong from the moment she met Asano, and the key to her future was demonstrating that he was a significant threat. If she could convince the messengers that Asano was a threat they needed to deal with themselves, she would be absolved of blame. The advantage to the superiority with which the messengers viewed themselves was that their expectations were low. If they were required to handle an issue, then it logically followed that a servant was insufficient to the task. One thing the messengers never blamed their servants for was not being their equals.

The key person Benella need to impress was a messenger ritualist who was new to the stronghold, Jes Fin Kaal. She had been dispatched by messenger leadership and was referred to by the other messengers as Voice Kaal. From what Benella could tell, she was something between a general and a priest. How that worked with the messengers' religious philosophy she was unsure, as the only thing the messengers seemed to worship was themselves. What Benella did know was that if she could get the favour of Kaal, she might escape the capricious attentions of her current master, Fal.

In the face of insurmountable power, the only choice was to surrender to it or be crushed by it. Watching her adventuring team get annihilated one by one had engraved this onto Benella's soul. In the wake of that, she had betrayed her own kind and her own world to enter the dangerous servitude offered by the messengers.

Benella was utterly convinced that the conquest of her world was inevitable. If she wanted any place in it, then service to the new rulers was the key, and the earlier the better. Only one thing had ever given her any uneasiness in this conviction, and he was what had led her to her current position. She had come to believe that the messengers

were right about their superiority, but Jason Asano gave her much the same feeling they did. It left her uncertain about her choice, wondering if she had betrayed everything and everyone, only to be wrong.

Like Benella, the messengers were also seeing a shift in their circumstances. The arrival of Voice Kaal had led to speculation amongst the servants that the messengers were primed to escalate the conflicts they were involved in. Benella didn't know much, but was aware that at least some of the strongholds were fighting enemies that went beyond the adventurers of the city.

Three messengers flew into the building through the roof gap; two male messengers of silver rank, flanking a third who was shorter and had no aura that Benella could detect. The messenger on the left was Lord Fal, while the one on the right she had seen in the stronghold, but didn't know the name of. Messengers rarely deigned to introduce themselves to the servant races.

Compared to the fair-skinned, golden-haired Fal, the messenger on the right was dark-skinned, with silver hair and solid silver orbs for eyes. His wings were black, with white feathers along the bottom edge. His hair draped down his back in strings of tight braids.

Both men were shirtless, showing off lean muscle but an odd absence of nipples. Their lower bodies were covered by loose, flowing pants of dark teal with gold trim. Their feet were bare but didn't touch the ground, which was typical. The messengers frequently floated in the air rather than set foot on the ground. Their wings did not work like a bird's and they were levitating around using their auras.

Silver-rank essence users could levitate using their auras, and golds could float around in slow flight. Compared to what the messengers could manage, however, it was a pale imitation. Not only could messengers move faster and with more control, but they were not easily disrupted by almost any intervention.

Benella presumed the messenger in the middle was Jes Fin Kaal. She was smaller than the others, barely taller than seven feet, and she lacked the domineering presence of the other two. Benella couldn't magically detect her presence at all, despite Kaal being gold rank. All she sensed were the silver rankers beside her.

Kaal's clothing was also different, being a loose robe of deep red, with white trim that matched her pristine white wings. Only a few wisps of black hair escaped the hood, which shadowed her pale, delicate features. Compared to the solid gold and silver orbs that the other messengers had for eyes, Kaal had more human eyes, albeit supernaturally blue. They stood out in the shadowy hood even more than her bright red lips.

Despite the auras radiating from the two messengers beside her, Benella could not take her eyes from the woman in the middle. Her compelling presence did not seem aura related, although perhaps it was some subtle effect, beyond Benella's ability to recognise. Her thoughts drifted back to Asano, whose presence had been similarly mysterious.

The three thrones rose into the air for the messengers to sit on, which they did. Fal looked down on Benella imperiously, which was almost comfortingly normal.

"You have asked to present to us information of a particular threat," Fal told her. "You speak of the man whose familiar followed you to our meeting."

"Yes," Benella said, steeling her nerve. "I had already determined this man was suspicious, and suggested investigation. The decision was made to move directly to elimination, but he detected our approach and fled. I had already initiated an investigation of him on my own initiative at that point, so I was able to gather a good amount of information. Then I contacted Lord Fal, and made the grave error of allowing the man to follow me using a shadow familiar."

"We expect our servants to serve to the best of their ability, no more and no less," the dark-skinned messenger said. "There is no admonition required in a failure to notice a child of the Reaper."

Relief flooded Benella, but she was not fool enough to thank the messenger. The implication that her consideration would matter to him would get her punished and possibly killed outright.

"After collating the information on this man from my various sources," she continued, "It became evident that he poses a potential threat. I believe that further investigation is warranted, but in the wake of my failure, I am unable to do so. Due to the Adventure Society learning that I serve you, I cannot return to the city and my associates are either going into hiding, fleeing the city or have already been snatched up."

"And what of these contacts?" the dark-skinned messenger asked. "What would be your recommendation?"

"Leave them be," Benella said. "If I were an Adventure Society officer looking into this, I would be laying traps for when agents come to tie off loose ends, compromising us further. There is a reason that agents in the city are not given critical information."

Benella was under no impression that they were looking for actual advice. The question had been a test, which was good. It meant that they were genuinely considering Benella for a position of actual relevancy. She at least still had a chance to get out of the building alive, if she could convince them that Jason Asano was a genuine threat.