

Chapter 753

Not Yet

Jason stood alone on one of several towers of a sprawling castle, reaching up for the sky. Sprawled out to the horizon under a bright blue sky were rolling hills, woodlands and vast plains of grass, all in the colours of early autumn. The air was clean, a breeze taking just the right edge from the heat of the sun.

“Wow,” Jason said to himself, as much about his presence as the vista. All the messengers whose inner realms he had entered previously had resisted to some degree, even the most willing. Jali was so open that not even her basic instincts mounted a defence against his intrusion. He’d practically tripped and fallen into her.

He couldn't imagine what her life had been like, living under a tyrant where not even her own mind was a haven. An existence where letting herself dwell on her doubts, on the iniquities of her life would lead to that life being snatched away. He couldn't help but think of Tera Jun Casta's ilk, the zealous, and imagine that they were better off. At least they were ignorant of their mind prisons, not forced to walk a tightrope of their own thoughts. At least those like Jali, the messengers with doubts, would be easier to save if the chance arose.

Jason floated into the air and away from the castle to get a better look at it. More like a complex of buildings than a single edifice, it wasn't like a real castle. It was more akin to something from a fairy tale or even a video game, with grand arches and towers jutting high into the air. There was a grand gate with a moat and a drawbridge, the moat fed by a nearby lake that sparkled in the sunlight.

Entering Jali's inner world was a very different proposition from when he had plunged into Tera Jun Casta's soul. That had been rushed and incautious, lack of experience and the time constraints lead him to jump in and start messing with things, not even forming an inner world to inhabit.

Jali's inner world was only possible because, like Jason himself, she was a being whose soul and body were one. Only a soul with a physical aspect could form a physical space that others could physically visit. Jason had a soul realm before becoming a gestalt entity, but the only ones that could join him inside it were his familiars, who were already anchored in his soul.

Forming a physical space inside messengers as a tool to liberate them was something he developed working with Marek and his subordinates. The idea was to minimise harm, but refining the process had been not without missteps. His early attempts

involved forcing the formation of the inner worlds and the messengers had instinctually fought back, like a spiritual immune system. This forced him to suppress that resistance, doing the opposite of his intention to have minimal collateral effect.

He learned that the key was to trigger the messengers to subconsciously form their inner worlds themselves. Not only was it faster and easier, but came so naturally and without resistance that it felt like jump-starting an inherent ability.

Jason suspected he was tapping into an aspect of the messengers that was part of their ability to progress to astral kings. Maybe even an aspect of what diamond-rank messengers like Mah Go Schaat were looking for. Jason worried he was creating a gaggle of future astral kings, but that was a problem for another day.

The soul spaces of Marek's people had not been exciting. It was all concrete blocks and empty landscapes, like a Soviet bloc country colonising a desert planet. They were blank, utilitarian and passionless. Jali's inner realm was a breath of fresh air; beautiful, vibrant and rich. It spoke to a longing for something more than the life she was trapped in.

This brought him to the next step of the process, which was finding Jali. Jason had full command of his soul realm and full control of himself when projected into someone else's. The messengers he helped were never in the same situation. In each case, they were locked away somewhere, bound by the strictures put in place by their astral king.

Floating in the air, Jason closed his eyes and extended his senses, swiftly finding Jali's location. She was somewhere under the castle, deep in a basement or dungeon. He could force his way directly to her but this castle was the central construct of her soul. He wasn't going to smash a path right through the middle of it.

The large castle gates were shut, the gates themselves blocked by a portcullis. As he didn't want to trigger any defence mechanisms, he decided to take a longer route with less resistance. There was a stairwell leading down on the flat roof of the tower he had been on, so he returned to it and used that.

He made his way through the castle, finding no signs of occupation. Unlike the outside with its fresh air and pleasant breeze, the interior was stagnant and musty. Rooms and halls, corridors and massive chambers, all dust-filled and empty, with even the doorways having empty hinges. That also meant no lighting, but Jason's ability to see through the dark worked even here.

Only one chamber contained anything in it at all; a throne room complete with throne. Sitting on the throne was a blurry, ghost-like figure, too indistinct to make out any details but rough size and shape. It was a messenger, complete with wings, and larger than

normal. It would easily stand head and shoulders above Jali, who already left Jason looking like a child.

As he watched the figure, he occasionally spotted sharper details flickering into place for a fleeting moment. Dark hair, olive skin. He suspected the person he was glimpsing to be Vesta Carmis Zell, Jali's astral king. This was the manifestation of the brand he would need to erase. He wouldn't do so before finding Jali, however, and resumed his search.

Jason found his way to the underground levels without too many pointless digressions into dead ends. Finally, he came to a doorway that actually had a door in it. Made with heavy wood and reinforced with metal bands, he could sense immediately that this was not a part of Jali's realm but a representation of the astral king's control.

On trying the door, Jason was unsurprised to find it locked. He placed a hand on it and started imposing his will. It resisted for a moment before dissolving into mist and vanishing, but with an incongruent sound of shattering glass.

The now empty doorway opened into a massive cylindrical chamber. The doorway was situated high up on a wall, opening onto empty air. There was a narrow column in the centre of the room, barely wide enough to stand on. It reached the same height as the door and Jali was balanced precariously atop it, waving her arms unsteadily as she fought for balance. Behind her, her wings were bound in thin wire, so tight that they cut into her, drawing lines of blood. She had spotted him and was looking his way with panicked, pleading eyes.

There was a loud, splashing from below and Jason glanced down. The bottom of the chamber was flooded and filled with spinning blades like massive fans. Anything that fell into them would swiftly become nothing more than a red stain in the churning water.

He realised that, like the door, this whole room was not part of Jali's inner realm. This was more control put in place by the astral king. This meant that Jason felt no compunction about forcibly making changes.

He concentrated at his feet and a bridge extended out from the base of the door, swiftly reaching the column. Jali was moving even before it was complete, leaping onto it and barrelling towards Jason in the doorway. He stepped out of her way, letting her through into the hallway.

"Let's get rid of those, to start with," he said and the wires digging into her wings snapped and fell away, dissolving before they hit the floor.

"Thank you," Jali said, looking past him and into the strange chamber he'd just rescued her from. "What is this place? One moment we were talking and then I was in that

room. I feel powerless. I can't fly. I couldn't even speak until you took those things off of my wings."

"Part of that is in your mind," Jason told her. "Another part is very much not, and that's what we're here to eliminate. You're extremely powerful here, if you can get your head around it. We just need to excise the things holding you back. Like the door that was here —and the wires on your wings. They're all metaphors."

"Are we inside my soul?"

"Yep. Slid right in, not even a token resistance. That's great for this specific situation, but probably not good in a broader sense. I don't know if you were just extremely ready for this or if there's a problem with your soul defences, but you should look into that later."

"How do I look into something like that?"

"No idea. Given that I might be the person with the most soul expertise I know, that's probably not great news for you."

He looked up at her, towering over him.

"Sorry," he said. "I imagine you'd rather hear something more encouraging right now."

"I still don't understand what's happening. This is my soul? This is a soul space, like your astral kingdom?"

"Yes. Well, like mine before I got an astral throne. It's like the more I become one with the astral throne, the more it messes with my soul realm. Like it's sifting through my soul to figure out how to absorb itself into me more fully. My rank is too low, so it causes side effects. Your soul realm should be nice and stable."

Jali looked down the dingy, unlit hallway, then back at the chamber she'd been trapped in.

"I don't think nice is the word."

"Oh, you might be surprised. Especially once we clean out the space a bit. We need to find the things that don't belong in your soul — myself excluded — and get rid of them. The first time I did this, with Tera Jun Casta, I didn't do any of this visualisation and I didn't work with her at all. I just did what I had to, crudely making blunt, inexpert changes. I was under time constraints and it was my first time doing anything like that."

"This is more than just visualisation," Jali said. "This is realisation. An actual space that you've forged from my soul."

"No," Jason corrected. "All I did was give you a subconscious prompt, and you made all this yourself."

Jali looked around again.

"My soul is a dark, damp hole with a massive torture room," she said morosely.

“Again, no,” Jason said. “The torture chamber here isn’t you. It’s Vesta Carmis Zell, and it needs to go.”

“How?”

“I’ll do it, but I want your guidance to cut out something this large. Take my hand.”

He held out his hand and she took it. They stood side by side in front of the door, Jason trying not to feel like a child being helped across the road.

“Feel what I do,” he told her. “Focus on what feels wrong, but don’t try to change it. Just let it happen and trust your instincts.”

Jason started pushing his will into the large chamber, pressing up against the lingering influence of the astral king. In person, the astral king would have scattered Jason's will to the wind, but this was an old, unattended remnant. Even projecting into Jali's soul wouldn't help her as the astral king would be using distant influence through a vessel that Jason has already started to break down. Through his direct connection to Jali, he was much more powerful than the astral king would be here.

The room started crumbling, brickwork tumbling into the water below. The water itself started steaming until the water and blades were obscured and fell silent. The column collapsed and disappeared. Behind the original brickwork was natural stone, the round room becoming an uneven cenote, the steam vanishing to reveal clear water below. It was gently flowing, part of some underground river that Jason guessed was connected to the lake.

The walls were covered in moss and vines. Balconies started emerging from the walls, also strewn with vines that started blooming with colourful flowers. Doorways appeared in the walls, making the balconies accessible to some network of rooms and passages beyond. One of the balconies appeared right in front of them.

The ceiling crumbled away to reveal open skies above. A domed framework then started crawling over the hole until it was completed and glass filled the gaps in the frame. The final part of the transformation was a waterfall that started spilling over the edge, splashing into the river below.

“Better?” Jason asked as he released Jali’s hand.

She stepped through the doorway onto the new balcony in front of them, leaning on the balustrade as she leaned over to look up and down.

“Better,” she said with a smile that split her face. It was an expression of earnest joy and wonder, unlike anything Jason had seen on a messenger before.

“Think you’re ready to fly, yet?” he asked.

Her wings unfurled, the previous signs of injury gone — not just healed but absent, even the blood that had spilled from the wounds removed. She rose into the air, a massive panel in the dome sliding open to let her out. As soon as she passed through it, she shot into the sky.

“You think taking one insignificant pawn from me will accomplish anything?” a female voice asked from behind Jason. Instead of turning around, he walked through the door and placed his hands on the balustrade. It was a little high to be strictly comfortable, being scaled to messenger proportions.

“It’s not about you,” he said, looking up at the sky. “Not yet, anyway.”