

Chapter 713

Better Ambitions

In the empty void of a dying universe, one lush green and blue planet remained. Shielded from entropy by magic older than the ancient universe itself, some of the Builder's most powerful agents prepared to move it to a fresh, young reality. In a dimension ship, floating far enough from the planet to not fall into its orbit, a collection of prime avatars were watching. Each avatar belonged to a different member of the Council of Kings, the closest thing the messengers had to central leadership.

What the avatars were watching was an army of the Builder's most powerful tools, the massive golems called world engineers, orbiting the planet. The avatars observed as the world engineers wrapped the planet in threads of intrinsic-mandate magic, like a spider wrapping up captured prey.

Along with the avatars, the observation room of the dimensional ship contained Erigo Fin Desca, the Builder's new prime vessel. After Shako was taken by the Sundered Throne, the Builder had finally chosen his replacement. Erigo had originally been a messenger and still looked like one, but with heavy modification by the Builder. His wings were gleaming silver metal and his skin looked and felt like cold alabaster. His eyes were orbs of amber glass and his hair was entirely absent. His toga-like clothes had no fabric, being made entirely of tiny, interlocked shards of metal. With hues ranging from coppery reds to ocean blue sapphire, they sparkled in glimmering waves of colour.

One of the astral king avatars was not watching the planet through the transparent wall of the observation deck of the spaceship-like dimensional vessel. Instead, he was looking over Erigo's clothes. This was the avatar of the astral king Jamis Fran Muskar, and he stood out from the other avatars, even compared to Erigo. Jamis was the only avatar whose wings had been completely absorbed into his body, making him look like a seven-foot-tall celestine with dark copper hair and eyes. Messengers, astral kings included, rarely hid their wings. He was also the only person in the room standing on the floor instead of floating over it. He wore shoes where the others had sandals or bare feet. Instead of diaphanous robes or draping togas, he wore fitted clothes in sober colours.

"How do you prevent pinching and chafing?" Jamis asked Erigo, still peering at his clothes. "Do you use magic, or perhaps some manner of conventional lubricant? So many of my fellows overlook the sensory pleasures once they become astral kings, but oiling oneself up is a delightful indulgence. All the better if someone does it for you."

“There are more important matters at hand than self-indulgence and the clothing choices of the Builder’s new vessel,” a woman told him. She was the prime avatar of Vesta Carmis Zell, the astral king whom Jes Fin Kaal served. Jamis turned to look at her, saying nothing. She held his gaze for only a moment before lowering her eyes. Jamis smiled slightly, then turned his attention to the planet outside.

“When this task is complete,” Jamis said, “the price is paid. Zithis Carrow Vayel will have fulfilled his debt to us.”

“His name is the Builder,” Erigo corrected. “He is not one of our kind anymore.”

“Our kind?” Jamis asked. “Do you consider yourself a messenger still, Erigo Fin Desca?”

“I am more a messenger than you, Jamis Fran Muskar. The astral kings are no longer messengers.”

Jamis tilted his head, examining Erigo as if he was a painting.

“You are part of the Unorthodoxy,” Jamis surmised. “Or you were, perhaps, prior to assuming your current position.”

“I was,” Erigo admitted. “I have moved on. There is little point fighting an oppressor that can turn you into a mindless drone and send you to fight your own allies.”

“We should destroy you, traitor,” one of the other astral kings said.

“Oh, don’t bother with our little friend, here,” Jamis told him.

“He thinks because he serves the Builder now that he—”

Jamis cut the astral king off, turning to look at the man.

“I said don’t bother with our little friend, here.”

Jamis raised an eyebrow to question if the astral king was done talking. The man stayed silent and bowed his head slightly, earning a friendly smile from Jamis.

“See?” Jamis asked the others. “We’re all friends, here. Erigo Fin Desca has told us himself that he has left the Unorthodoxy behind. Perhaps we can even bargain some of the Unorthodoxy’s secrets out of him, now that his loyalty lies elsewhere. If nothing else, it would not do to antagonise the Builder while he is still in the process of moving our planet for us.”

“Wise,” Erigo said. “You have received a fine reward when all you did was provide some low-level ritual magic.”

“You truly have forgotten yourself as a messenger,” Vesta Carmis Zell told him.

“Adapting our magic so that the lesser species can use it was a task completely below us. Having our ritualists lower themselves to do so cost them dignity, which is more precious than Zithis Carrow Vayel can understand.”

“I have told you his name,” Erigo said. “I will not remind you again.”

“We apologise,” Jamis said. “Please excuse us, Erigo Fin Desca. We have internal issues to discuss, and I promise more civility when we speak again.”

“I will go and supervise the proceedings directly,” Erigo said. “See that civility is maintained the next time we speak or this planet goes nowhere.”

Jamis gestured and the transparent wall rippled like the surface of a pond. Erigo floated through, accelerating swiftly in the direction of the planet. When he was gone, Jamis turned on Vesta.

“I recognise that you don’t have any interest in our actual goals on Pallimustus,” he told her, “but you would do well not to antagonise the Builder’s servant. It is not yet time to make the Builder our enemy, and while you may not care about that. . .”

Jamis walked over to Vesta.

“...I do,” Jamis finished. He stared up at Vesta who would have stood taller than him even if she wasn't floating.

“Every astral king in this room,” Jamis continued, “other than you, Vesta Carmis Zell, is focused on our larger goal and not some personal project.”

“You have no say over my agenda or my actions,” Vesta shot back.

“That is true, so long as you do not take something that is not a problem to us and make it one.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your nascent astral king?”

“You mean the Asano boy? How do you know about him?”

Jamis responded with a laugh.

“I need him for the moment,” Vesta said. “I will kill him when that need is done.”

“I would recommend against it,” Jamis said.

“He has to die. He’s turning into an astral king. He has already started replacing my mark on the souls of my messengers.”

“So? This council represents the strongest of the astral kings. There are many others, and even a few powerful eccentrics who have declined to be part of our little group. They are no problem to us, so what do we care if their number grows by one?”

“But he is not a messenger.”

Jamis laughed again.

“I forget how young you are, Vesta Carmis Zell. I do not fear the rise of another original.”

“Original? What does that mean?”

“It does not fall to me to teach you history.”

“Asano threatens to become more than just an astral king. He claims domains like a god and employs intrinsic-mandate magic.”

“An astral king with their own unique abilities?” Jamis asked, clutching his hands in front of him. “That’s never happened before, whatever shall we do?”

“You mock me, but if left to his own devices, he can become a powerful enemy.”

Jamis laughed once more.

“Every person here is an enemy to everyone else in this room, yet we work together regardless.”

“You think Asano will work with us?”

“Perhaps. Forever is a very long time to say something will never happen. But, for now, his concerns are too small for the likes of us to care about or obstruct. With the exception of yourself, of course.”

“And if his concerns grow larger?”

“Then it will be in concert with his power. He might have the strength to be a challenge to your agenda, Vesta Carmis Zell, but you are the one who chose to pursue a separate goal from the rest of us. You might find yourself in a position where he has the strength to cause you trouble, but that is not the case for the rest of us. By the time he is powerful enough to fight for the purification artefact, it will already have been found and claimed. Preferably by us. He also has little interest in it. Like you, his goals and ours move in different directions.”

Vesta narrowed her eyes.

“How do you know so much about him?”

“You said it yourself: he is a potential threat. Only a fool would ignore that, so I took an interest. And, as it turns out I agree with you; he is a threat, but only a potential one. Should his interests and ours clash once he has enough power to be worth dealing with, then deal with him we must. But if we went around annihilating every potential threat, our entire species would spend their entire lives roaming the cosmos, smiting silver and bronze-rankers. We’d have to start wiping out planets just to save time. That, I’m sure you’d agree, would be more trouble than it’s worth.”

“Asano is different. He isn’t just some ordinary threat.”

“He is different, yes. The confluence of events, circumstances and powers that came together to shape him is extraordinary. But the cosmos is far more vast than you can imagine, Vesta Carmis Zell. At this very moment, there are more people with equally

extraordinary stories than your mind is capable of comprehending. Let me assure you that the way to deal with these people is to leave them alone.”

“If you know so much, do you know what happened to the diamond-ranker you all saddled me with?”

“Yes,” Jamis said. “And since his killer's agenda does not interfere with ours, I will leave the matter alone. If you want to pursue it, that is for you to do on your own. But, as with Asano, I recommend you follow my lead and let the issue lie.”

“Even if I was willing to swallow my pride over a jumped-up silver-ranker, I still have need of him.”

“Jumped-up silver-ranker? A moment ago he was a terrible new astral king ready to bring us all down with his unheard-of powers. You need to settle in your own mind if you're dealing with a genuine threat or an insignificant bug who has come to unlikely prominence. He can't be both.”

“For now, he is the latter,” Vesta said. “Left to his own devices, he will become the former.”

“Then I advise you to leave him to his own devices. People like Asano, who find themselves at the crux of great events, have a habit of enduring everything thrown at them and coming back stronger. And those who placed them in the crucible are left forgotten in the ashes of history. Asano is not a threat to the agenda of anyone in this room except for you. You are more interested in your personal hobbies than our collective interest and that is your prerogative. Asano is only a problem if you make him one, and none of us will interfere if you make that problem yours. But if you make it mine, then my first course of action will be to feed you to him and see if that solves it.”

“You would choose him over me?”

“You are the one who called him a future threat, and you were right. Today, you are a member of this council and he is some essence user that I can ignore. A hundred years from now, you will be in the exact same place you are now, but where will he be?”

“A century from now I will not be in the same place,” Vesta insisted.

“Right, your little hobby. Do you really think another soul forge will make that much difference?”

Vesta's eyes widened for the slightest moment before she regained her composure.

“Oh yes,” Jamis said. “I'm fully aware of what you're after, Vesta Carmis Zell; I just don't care. I will give you my advice anyway, knowing full well that you will ignore it: Find better ambitions. Stop scavenging for power outside the group and turn your efforts to

seeking out the purification artefact. Becoming a critical player in our greater plans will serve you better than carving your own path.”

“Of course you would say that.”

Jamis laughed.

“I am biased, it’s true. But my advice stands. Asano has made an unreasonable demand of your Voice of the Will. Use it as a chance to withdraw and re-strategise without losing face.”

Vesta narrowed her eyes again.

“You’ve been paying close attention.”

“No, Vesta Carmis Zell, I have not. My information comes from paying a regular amount of attention without you ever noticing. Perhaps you should dwell on the ramifications of that when considering my advice.”