

Chapter 765

Confident Guesses

The expedition's gold rankers, plus Clive and Jason, were having a strategy meeting before resuming their descent down the shaft.

"Unfortunately," Miriam said, "Destruction's involvement doesn't change anything."

"Unfortunately?" Gabriel asked.

"Meaning that our plan is so vague," Jason explained, "that there aren't enough specifics to change. We're still heading down and trying to use this device while stopping whatever counter-plans anyone down there has. 'Anyone' now including at least one god, the cult of a great astral being, two varieties of messenger, whatever the natives have going on, and whoever else has managed to sneak down there while the Magic Society was building a town on top of the hole. With blindfolds on, apparently, given that anyone can apparently just stroll down here."

"At least we've confirmed that the regular messengers aren't playing us straight," Gabriel said.

"Yes," Emir agreed. "They've gone from 'almost to certainly going to betray us' to 'certainly going to betray us.' There's that."

"It does bring up an interesting question," Jason mused. "What kind of agreement did the messengers make with Destruction?"

"They wouldn't accept anything that robs them of their prize," Miriam said. "I don't see the messengers joining hands with the god of destruction unless they're very confident about getting what they want, although Destruction seemed to think he'd gotten one over on them."

"I think it's more likely that either the device doesn't do what it says on the tin," Jason said, "or that Destruction had some way to trigger the cataclysm anyway, once the device has been used."

"Assuming that the devastation level we already anticipate is enough for the god of destruction," Clive said. "Perhaps he has some way of amplifying the effect with divine power."

"Oh, thank you for that," Emir said. "I was just thinking that I wasn't anywhere close to worried enough, and here you come to clear that right up. That's tremendous, Clive, thank you."

"Perhaps a mix of all those scenarios?" Constance suggested, bringing things back on topic while giving her husband a stern look. "Destruction has some means to sabotage

the device, but the messengers are convinced he'll only use it after it has given them what they want."

Emir was primarily an ideas man and the face of his treasure-hunting organisation. As Emir's wife and Chief of Staff, Constance was the detail-oriented half of the pairing, which sometimes made her closer to a babysitter than she would admit to liking.

"None of this matters," Amos said. "Asano said it: nothing's changed. We go down and we figure it out on the spot."

"He's right," Miriam said. "We don't have enough information for speculation to be useful. Let's get moving."

The teams clambered into the remaining crawlers, now in various states of disrepair. Three had lost their roll cages and two had been jury-rigged back into functionality by Gary. One crawler had been a complete write-off, cannibalised for parts. This left a few members of the expedition stuck clinging to the remaining roll cages.

Most of these people were gold-rankers but Jason was also among them. With multiple means of flight and a demonstrable resistance to exotic magic, he was more likely to avoid plunging down the shaft if thrown off. While he waited for his crawler to load, another divine aura manifested right beside him. This time it was not just an aura but an image of a bookish woman in brown robes.

"Knowledge," Jason said. "It's been a while."

"Are you still piqued I didn't tell your friends you were alive?"

"Now that you ask, I am a little bit, yeah."

"I did not know for certain, so it was not right to tell them. I'm the goddess of knowledge, Jason, not of very confident guesses."

"Yeah, Gabrielle told me about the same. You keep her away from Travis, by the way; he's a sweet boy, but utterly hopeless with women."

"That is between him and Gabrielle. It is not for you and I to interfere."

"Yeah, I'm sure you're staying out of the relationship between your priestess and a guy who represents possibly the largest store of alien knowledge ever to arrive on this planet."

"This discussion is not why I'm here, Jason."

"Yeah, but it's fun though, right?"

She snorted a small laugh, to the startlement of the expedition that had stopped loading up to gawk at the encounter.

"Are you teasing me, Mr Asano?"

“You’re the one asking questions you already know the answer to. Which is all questions, I guess. You’re here about Destruction?”

“Yes. I wanted to remind you of certain facts, starting with that I am the goddess of knowledge, not him. He does not see all and he does not know all. Especially not what has transpired on other planets.”

“What does Earth have to do with any of this?”

“I cannot tell you what Destruction had planned, any more than I could reveal that Disguise was masquerading as Purity. Such things are the affairs of other gods, operating within their primary spheres of influence. What I can do is remind you of things you already know, such as the means by which you saved your world twice over. I suggest you keep the methodology in the forefront of your mind.”

“Oh, oblique advice on solving a problem instead of just telling me. At least it’s not an ambiguously worded prophecy, I guess.”

“I have already—”

“Yeah, spheres of influence, I get it. I don’t suppose there’s anything you can just straight-up tell us?”

The goddess shook her head with the expression of a mother indulging her child more than she knew she should.

“Beaufort’s intentions are what he claims,” she said. “You do not need to second-guess his agenda.”

“And who is Beaufort?”

“Someone whose agenda you would otherwise second-guess. He still has people in Yaresh, especially in the Magic Society. These were mercenary agents, not true believers that departed with the others, but they’ve continued to watch your activities with care. Even down here, the information they’ve gathered has been fed to Beaufort. He understands your power and your importance to what happens next. He will work with you honestly.”

“I have an unpleasant suspicion of who you’re talking about. Which means that I won’t want to work with him, will I?”

“You will not. But he knows that this expedition is the only chance he has at survival, or even a clean death.”

“I’m inclined towards clean death.”

“That is for your group to decide, but be aware that you will need the strength of his forces.”

Jason groaned.

“That’s just fantastic.”

“Just remember my words, Jason. How you saved your world. You will need to push for it in this world, triggering it yourself. But you have the power, I promise you that, but I cannot promise you will wield it effectively. That falls to you.”

“Do you think it will come to that?”

A smile teased the goddess' lips

“I already told you, Jason: I'm not the goddess of very confident guesses.”

Jason let out a groaning sigh.

“Of course you're not. Nothing but to get to it then, I suppose. Oh, and Knowledge?”

“Yes?”

He gave the goddess a genuine smile, free of his signature half-smirk.

“Thank you for helping us.”

The goddess' smile was the first light on a warm spring morning.

“You are trouble to work with, Jason, but I'm determined to get some use out of you yet. Just try not to die *too* often.”

“I'll do my best, but you know how it is.”

“Yes,” she said. “I do.”

Miriam and Jason were once again sharing a crawler with half of Jason's team. Jason was hanging off the roll cage like it was a jungle gym as the crawler made its way down the rough wall of the shaft. Miriam activated a privacy screen, drawing immediate complaints from Clive in the driver's seat.

“How am I meant to steer this thing when everything is blurry? It's bad enough driving by the light of glow stones with shadows dancing off every lump in the rock.”

“Apologies,” Miriam said adjusting the brooch that generated the screen. The sound barrier stayed in place while the visual blurring disappeared.

“Thank you,” Clive said, still grumpy.

“Operations Commander,” Miriam said, “I was hoping to get more insight into what the goddess told you. Firstly, you saved your world twice?”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “It's a very long story, but the short version starts with the understanding that the dimensional membrane around my world is extremely fragile. Brittle, almost. Smash a big enough hole and it might not close again. My entire planet is far too vulnerable to being annihilated by astral forces, leaving a giant hole in the universe where it used to be. I know a lot of people have wondered how I got caught up with great astral beings, and that's the answer. They needed someone who could move between worlds, powerful enough to change things but not so powerful I break them in the attempt.”

"That all sounds bad," Miriam said.

"Relying on a guy whose greatest skill is eighties action-adventure television trivia to save the world is not great, no. But reality has mechanisms to help repair itself, especially our two worlds, for reasons I'm definitely not going into now."

"Yet you have time to mention your stupid sky dog stories," Neil pointed out.

"Don't give me that, Neil, you know damn well it's *Airwolf*."

"Operations Commander," Miriam said pointedly.

"Sorry," Jason said. "So, reality tries to repair itself. As the magic in the world I come from became unstable for reasons I also won't go into, dimensional spaces appeared to repair damage that started randomly appearing in the dimensional membrane."

"Randomly appearing?" Miriam said. "That also sounds very bad."

"Yep. These dimensional spaces were dubbed transformation zones. They appear and plug the hole as best they can before vanishing, but the area is left changed."

"Which is why they're called transformation zones?"

"Precisely. It affects the people, too, shifting their very species. I'd be interested in what Carlos Quilido made of that, but that's for another day. These changes are left like scars on reality, but the world manages to limp on. But if you get a transformation zone appearing right on top of an astral space, it all goes very wrong. Seeping ulcer in the side of the universe wrong."

"He's massively simplifying the reality of the dimension forces involved to the point of not being accurate," Clive pointed out.

"She's just looking for the general idea, Clive," Jason said, "not a lecture on dimensional membrane theory."

"Are you sure?" Clive asked. "I can still elucidate the basics while driving. I think it would be useful in helping her grasp the context of—"

"Extremely sure, Clive, but thank you," Jason cut him off. "Anyway, the next thing you need to understand all this is that I have a specific power. The World-Phoenix gave me a blessing. Custom designed, just for me. You can sense how my body and soul are fused, like a messenger's?"

"Yes."

"That's only one aspect of it. Another is that I have a stabilising effect on the physical reality around me, and a third is that I have an easier time slipping through dimensional boundaries. I can walk right through a sealed astral space aperture, for example."

"Or into a transformation zone?" Miriam guessed.

“Exactly. A transformation zone is essentially a zone of reality that is in flux. I had to go in and fix it, and I did not know how. I pretty much ran on instinct. I did this twice before my world’s magic stabilised and the transformation zones stopped appearing. The first time, the results were passable but not ideal. The second time I did a lot better. In the course of affecting that first zone, I was transformed a little as well. In shaping the zone, I also shaped myself. I gained the power to imprint on reality, which is how I managed to stabilise the transformation zone completely.”

“Imprint on reality,” Miriam said.

“Yes.”

“Like a god creating sacred ground?” she asked.

“I love working with people who are quick on the uptake,” Jason said with a grin. “No offence, Neil.”

“Just so you know,” Neil said, “that whole sacred ground thing means that when he says he fixed the zones, he did it by turning them into temples to himself. To himself. I think that officially makes him the most self-aggrandising man in the cosmos.”

“Sacred ground,” Miriam repeated thoughtfully. “Like your cloud building?”

“Yes,” Jason said. “Just larger and fixed in place when I reshape a transformation zone.”

“Really?” Neil asked. “The guy is building temples to himself. Why aren’t people more outraged by this?”

“Just ignore him, he’s a priest,” Jason told her. “They get so touchy when you assume the role of a god, even if it’s just a little bit. It’s not a big deal, Neil.”

“He does have something of a point,” Miriam said. “I can’t help but feel that a silver-ranker creating temples to himself should be a matter of concern,” Miriam said.

“Thank you. Finally, someone gets it,” Neil said.

“I’m quite certain there are people that grasp the import,” Humphrey said. He had thus far stayed out of the conversation, quietly sitting next to Sophie, their fingers interlocked as they held hands.

“You realise that your god didn’t say anything about it when he came to visit me,” Jason told Neil.

“What?” Neil asked. “When was this?”

“Just before the messengers invaded Yareh. He even gave me a present.”

“What kind of present?” Neil asked.

“Not sure. Can’t use it until I get a soul forge. Something about creating an astral entity.”

“I think we should stay on topic,” Miriam said. “Was Knowledge saying that you’ll need to forcibly trigger one of these transformation zones?”

“I think she was, yeah. Which is a whole thing, let me tell you.”

It wasn’t just at Allayeth’s insistence that team Moon’s Edge had been assigned to the expedition. They were the local Yareh team least likely to have been compromised by the messengers, due to Allayeth’s close oversight of them and their famous personal loyalty to her. The icing on the cake was multiple members with elemental powers. One of them had the iron essence, one the earth essence and one with both the fire and earth essences.

The two earth essence users were useful in mapping out the shaft well ahead of their location, only powerful sense-masking abilities like those of the spider moles preventing them from accurately determining the geography around them. This allowed them to notify Miriam as they finally approached their destination. She called the expedition to a halt to make an announcement through voice chat.

“Our earth users have picked up on a massive cavern system below. They’ve also noted that the rock within the areas they can sense appears to be riddled with what looks like tree roots to their senses. What that means, we can’t be sure. We’ll move ahead with caution but be ready for heavy combat. It may come from the walls again, as with the spider moles and the worms.”

“I can use my senses to poke around and see if I can get an idea of what those roots are,” Jason told Miriam. “My concern would be if the bad guys notice me looking and send an army of elemental messengers.”

“Amos Pensinata might be a better choice,” she said.

“Possibly,” Jason said. “But when I heard roots, my hackles went up.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Because with how deep we are underground, how likely are we to run into trees?”

“Not very.”

“Exactly. But what we do have is messengers and something that the messengers tried to turn into a soul forge. I may be shooting in the dark here, but I can’t help but think about the fact that the messengers are birthed from trees. My concern is that maybe there’s some twisted version of a messenger birthing tree down here. It would explain how the number of elemental messengers is suspiciously high. The regular messengers never told us how many they lost, but the estimates I got from one of my messenger prisoners made the number that came out of this shaft they dug a bit suspect.”

“You’re suggesting that the elemental messengers have been reproducing?”

“It’s just a guess based on too little information,” Jason said. “It tickles my instincts, though. Messengers don’t have a child state. They come out fully formed, naïve but complete with language skills. They get pushed through indoctrination and sent right off to join the evil army. If they’re making more of these elemental messengers, who seem kind of mindless and angry, they’d be ready to go, fresh off the vine.”

“Meaning that there could be countless numbers of them down there.”

“I don’t think that’s entirely true,” Clive said. “Even with magic, you don’t get something from nothing. Even when material appears to be conjured from thin air it’s really drawing magic from the astral and shaping it. The same way magic manifestations turn into monsters or essences. But these elementals are real creatures, not summoned monsters. This suggests that they would need a source of material that originated in reality.”

“They’re elemental creatures,” Neil said. “Could they just use rock as the material?”

“Maybe,” Clive said. “I think it’s more likely that they need living matter, at least in part. Most likely, the natives already down here. They may have all been turned into elemental messengers.”

“That’s a grim thought,” Jason said. “But the question remains, should I try taking a peek at these roots? I may be able to confirm or disprove some of this speculation. Equally, I may bring a bunch of elemental messengers down on our heads. Or up under our feet, I guess.”

Miriam decided to bring some of the other gold-rankers into a voice channel and discuss it. They ultimately decided that more information was worth the risk of a fight that was inevitable anyway, and at least they could prepare. Platforms and alcoves were stone-shaped from the walls, setting up defensive positions for ranged and support members of the group. The crawlers were secured higher up the shaft.

While all this was happening, Clive used specialised equipment to run a series of tests on the ambient magic. The elemental energy was much more pervasive, with even Jason no longer willing to attempt opening a portal. Clive made a list of other potential effects on essence abilities, not all of which were negative.

For essence users with the right essences, their powers were likely to be more powerful, but harder to control. Gary, with his fire and iron essences, and Farrah with her fire, earth and volcano essences, fell firmly into this group. The gold-rank elemental essence users from Team Moon’s edge would be even more impactful.

Once everything was ready, Jason reached out with his senses, his team all around him.

“This preparation may have all been for nothing,” Belinda pointed out.

“Uh, nope,” Jason said, his voice an octave higher than normal. “Those roots are some weird messenger stuff alright. And I’m pretty sure they noticed me checking.”

“That was quick,” Taika said.

“Yep,” Jason agreed. He drew his sword, the white runes on the blade turning red as it slid from the sheath. “Just so you know, there seems to be quite a lot of them.”