

## Chapter 766

### You Don't Do it Blindly

Jason and Miriam stood surrounded by others at the edge of a platform. Leaning out to look down they saw the seething mass of elemental messengers rising up the shaft.

"How are there this many?" Miriam asked, her voice hollow.

The shaft was thick with elemental messengers, rising like a cloud. In the dark, fiery powers flared and sparked, casting the ocean of winged figures in ominous light and dancing shadows.

"Does this count as a lot?" Jason asked.

She was about to shoot him a retort, then remembered what she'd seen while going over his record. Asano's Adventure Society badge kept a record of everything he had killed, from people to monsters to anything else. The vast majority stemmed from his time on his original world, and the numbers involved were outlandish to the point of implausibility. She'd had the Magic Society check the numbers several times and still suspected that shifting between worlds had altered the badge somehow. According to the record, he'd done more killing than she had, despite his much lower rank and vastly shorter career.

The number of monsters he'd killed at silver rank had gotten him to the wall in record time, but no further. Despite culling silver-rank monsters at a rate that made a monster surge seem tame, his advancement had almost stopped and the reason was obvious: What he was fighting didn't pose a significant threat. Armies of monsters, according to the numbers recorded by his badge, and other things besides. She had wondered about something called living anomalies, which she had just learned were monster-like entities that existed in the transformation zones he'd talked about.

She had never entirely believed the reality of the numbers, thinking that somehow the badge was tampered with or affected by travel between worlds. But standing beside him as he looked down at an army of elemental messengers rising through the dark she saw that he was completely calm.

Even Asano's powerful aura couldn't entirely mask his emotions from Miriam's gold-rank senses, and while nervousness rippled through the expedition, he was completely relaxed. If anything, he was oddly centred, his normal self-amused attitude fading away. While everyone around them steeled themselves for battle, he gave off a sense of being exactly where he was meant to be. When he gave her a side glance, a slight smile playing on his lips, she realised she'd been probing his emotions with a little more force than was strictly polite.

“Don’t worry,” he assured her. “Fighting armies from another dimension is kind of my thing.”

She was extremely interested in learning more about Asano’s time in the other world, but this was not the moment. For the moment, she was just happy to have someone standing beside her who looked at the largest collection of enemies she’d ever seen like they were a long queue at the sandwich shop. He flashed her a reassuring grin that vanished as he conjured his cloak, his face vanishing into the hood.

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Humphrey’s strongest singular attack was called Unstoppable Force. It delivered massive amounts of the two most powerful forms of damage, short of transcendent.

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#### Ability: [Unstoppable Force] (Might)

- Special Attack (melee).
- Base cost: High mana, extreme stamina.
- Cooldown: 1 Minute.
  
- Current rank: Silver 5 (16%).
  
- Effect (Iron): Melee attack with massive momentum, dealing large amounts of additional resonating-force and disruptive-force damage. Requires a heavy weapon.
- Effect (Bronze): For each enemy struck the cooldown of this ability and the cost of the next use of this ability are reduced.
- Effect (silver): Attack generates a blast wave of resonating-force and disruptive-force damage originating from each enemy struck.

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Unstoppable Force was not a rare ability. One of the most common powers from one of the most common essences, it was the quintessential example of rare not automatically meaning best. It was also the opposite of complicated, famous as the most straightforward and iconic of all special attacks. It simply took a regular attack and added the magnitude of damage countries signed treaties to prevent. It was the ideal power to thoughtlessly swing at an enemy and still get tremendous results. But Humphrey could do better than that.

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#### Racial Gift: [Hero’s Sacrifice]

- Sacrifice your health to enhance the power of your special attacks.

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Humphrey’s twice-evolved human gift turned life force into power. That had been a risky move at bronze-rank, but at silver, he had health to burn. Another of Humphrey’s

signatures was combination attacks, allowing multiple special attacks to be used in a single strike.

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#### Ability: [Dive Bomb] (Wing)

- Special Attack (movement, combination).
  - Base cost: High stamina.
  - Cooldown: 20 seconds.
  
  - Current rank: Silver 4 (89%).
  
  - Effect (Iron): Accelerate down to attack a target from above; can be combined with normal or special melee attacks. Physical damage from these attacks is increased. No falling damage is suffered when using this ability, even if the attack misses.
  
  - Effect (Bronze): A resonating-force shockwave is produced from the impact point.
  
  - Effect (silver): All damage from melee weapons and melee special attacks combined with this ability is increased, regardless of damage type. Striking enemies and obstacles other than the designated target does not end this ability unless the attack's momentum is fully arrested.
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Dive Bomb was a special attack purpose-built to strike from above. Normally Humphrey set it up with his flight and teleport powers, but the horde of enemies pouring up the shaft presented a dream scenario. By targeting a foe deep behind the frontline, anyone and anything that got in his path suffered the full effect of his powers without consuming them, until the attack against his target was resolved.

Humphrey signalled his intentions to the team.

"I'm pulling a *Battlefield Earth*," he warned them.

"Which one is that again?" Taika asked through voice chat, still learning the team's strategies. "Also, why did you let Jason name the tactics?"

"It's the one where Humphrey pulls a move that was always going to end in a massive bomb," Jason tells him.

"Bro, that's a stretch."

Humphrey ignored them and triggered his abilities. Combining Dive Bomb, Hero's Sacrifice and Unstoppable Force, he picked the furthest enemy he could sense, as the target, deep in a mass of elemental messengers too thick to see through. Plunging out of the expedition forces, he crashed through the enemy like a meteor. Ramming into anything between himself and the target, he ploughed through without so much as slowing down. Every impact came with a pair of shockwaves from Dive Bomb and Unstoppable Force as he bowled through enemies, knocking them away like bowling pins.

Not every foe was sent flying away and, by less than a fifth of the way to the target, Humphrey's dragon sword had impaled enemies down the full length of the blade. Further foes were struck by the tip and blasted away or even torn in half, Humphrey passing through mists of blood and viscera. The impaled enemies suffered shockwave after shockwave until they too were torn apart, making room for fresh meat.

Projectiles bounced off Humphrey's dragon wings and his dragon armour. Barriers of metal and stone were conjured in his path but he tore through them like they were tissue paper. A gold-ranker moved to intercept him and bounced right off, doing no more than shuddering Humphrey as he continued down.

Resonating-force was exceptionally effective on tough, rigid enemies like stone and metal affinity messengers. Disruptive-force was effective against the semi-tangible states of the ash and fire messengers, their advantage turned to vulnerability as Humphrey scattered them like fog before a gust.

Finally, Humphrey struck his chosen target. The gold-rank messenger was fifteen feet tall, bigger than even the largest of normal messengers. His body was obsidian black, complete with glossy sheen, and Humphrey's sword plunged into it, the combined impact and shockwave tearing the leftover enemies from his blade.

For all the power of his attack, Humphrey knew it was far from enough to take down a gold-ranker. Even as the shock of hitting the enemy still reverberated through his sword, he was reaching for a consumable item on his belt.

Humphrey had a standard adventuring belt, enchanted to shield his potions and other sundry items from incidental damage. He reached down and touched a small ceramic disk held in a custom sheath. The ludicrously expensive, single-use consumable turned to powder.

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- You have used [Greater Man-Catcher].
  - Your next short-range teleport within 5 seconds can bring along a hostile enemy you are in physical contact with. Target can be up to gold-rank or one rank higher than the teleport power, whichever is lower.
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Humphrey used his teleport to return him to the expedition force and bring the elemental messenger with him. Gold-rank allies pounced on the messenger as Neil's Life Force bolts started landing on Humphrey, restoring his health.

Hitting so many enemies had reset the cooldown on Unstoppable Force immediately and Humphrey dived back into the fray, this time using it more conventionally. At the same time, he requested access to the expedition command channel. After being allowed to join

he gave a brief report of what he'd sensed while deep behind enemy lines. Before leaving the channel again.

He joined Taika in his fast-moving, hard-hitting disruption of the enemy forces. The messengers were too mindlessly aggressive for tactics or strategy, failing to fully capitalise on their numbers or adapt well to the strategies of their enemies. Humphrey and Taika, the team's high-impact adventurers, were able to put them on the back foot and lead the way for the others.

"Good to have you back, bro. I saw your death-dive. You don't muck about."

"Thank you."

"Yeah," Taika continued. "You fight the same way Jason makes life choices."

"What?"

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Miriam accepted a chat request from Humphrey Geller.

"Commander," his voice came through. "I just got a sense of the far side of the enemy. It was hard to be sure with so many auras, but I think they were being attacked from below."

"Any further details?" she asked.

"No, Commander, I'm sorry. It was brief and my senses aren't like Jason's or Lord Pensinata's."

"Thank you," Miriam said and cut off the channel. She had one perpetually open to Amos Pensinata, who had the strongest senses in the expedition by far.

"Pensinata," she ordered. "What can you give me on the far side of the enemy forces?"

"I will have to pull back from the fight and concentrate to reach through all these auras," he told her. That was not an inconsiderable drawback, given that he was one of their strongest individual combatants, but it was worth the loss.

"Do it," she told him, then returned her attention to the battle.

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Jason took his usual role in such large-scale conflicts of loading up as many enemies as he could with afflictions. He wouldn't be immediately impactful anywhere, but his total damage across the course of the fight would rival or eclipse most gold-rankers. The exceptions to this were the adventurers with elemental powers related to earth or fire. They, unsurprisingly, were the shining stars of the battle. The elemental messengers were all enhanced as well, however, so the adventurers needed to pick their targets well, not using fire to attack fire or earth to attack earth.

Gary and especially Farrah were likewise punching well above their normal weight. Gary was an impassable wall, moving around the makeshift battlements the expedition had set up. He shielded ranged attackers, held barricades under assault and blocked attempts to collapse the stone platforms by attacking the points at which they were attached to the shaft walls.

Farrah was an outright demoness, from her lava and obsidian whip sword to storms of obsidian shards and the heinous lava cannon. Oddly enough, one of her most useful powers was her perception ability. It allowed her to see through smoke, ash clouds and other obscuring factors in a battlefield already poorly lit. She also benefited from an expedition worth of auras including the shared, enhanced mana recovery that was a highlight of Jason's team.

Unfortunately for the expedition, a handful of bright stars did not make up for the enemy's advantage. While some adventurers were boosted by the enhanced elemental magic, *all* of the messengers were. If they weren't too stupid to do anything beyond rush up the shaft in a shapeless horde, the expedition would have been overrun. Teamwork, tactics and strategy were the counterbalancing factors, and they worked — at least while the adventurers were still fresh.

The horde's number suggested that Jason's theory of a birthing tree had merit. This was further supported by the mercifully small number of gold-rankers on the other side. If the horde had been spawned from a birthing tree, none would have had time to advance. This meant that the gold-rankers amongst them almost certainly came from the original messenger group. As a consequence, while the silver-rank horde could be churned out quickly, every gold-ranker they lost would be a massive blow.

Seeming to recognise this, the strongest messengers hung back from the fight. Although still animalistic, the gold-rank elemental messengers had a higher order of cunning, and the wits to understand the danger. As a result, the gold-ranker adventurers were free to cut loose, forming the solid core of adventurer defence.

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"Tactical Commander," Amos said through his direct channel to Miriam. "There is a force attacking the elemental messengers from below. They are Builder cultists and appear to be trying to force their way directly towards the shaft."

"Any indication if they're trying to reach us or simply trying to use the shaft to escape the underground?"

"Not that I saw."

"It seems unlikely that this is the moment they would pick to make a break for it," Jason said.

"This is meant to be a private channel," Miriam said.

"Yeah, but it's my communication power."

"So, you have heard everything anyone has said through those channels."

"You don't need to worry, Tactical Commander," Jason assured her. "I take privacy very seriously. Although I did hear you talking with your team member Alice, but you shouldn't worry about that either. Just go to an alchemist and they'll give you a topical cream."

"This is hardly the time, Operations Commander," Miriam said.

"I'm just kidding, I don't listen in. I just sensed you talking with Lord Pensinata after he extended his senses so far and I jumped into your channel to hear what he found."

"I have reported," Amos said. "Am I free to return to the battle?"

"You are," Miriam said, then she and Jason shifted to the command channel.

"Do you think this Beaufort that Knowledge mentioned is the leader of the Builder cult?" Miriam asked.

"I do," Jason told her.

"Do you think they're trying to reach us?"

"Yes."

"Which leaves us with a choice. Our people are holding off the messengers for now, but we're going to run out of mana before they run out of bodies to throw at us. Long before, from what we're seeing. We can either back off and see if your butterflies can thin them out, or try and fight down to the Builders, form the alliance Knowledge seems to think we'll need and hope they have some kind of redoubt we can all escape to."

"That's my read as well."

"You're the operations commander," Miriam said. "Your job is to decide what we do. Mine is to figure out how, and to tell you if we can't. Or shouldn't."

"You favour pulling back?"

"It's what my instincts are telling me. But I'm not the operations commander for a reason. This whole situation is a series of choices I'd rather not make. You were put in charge because you're the one who has been through madness that most of us wouldn't think possible, let alone be willing to confront. You know how to crest that wave."

"I think you may be overselling me, but I also think you're right about my instincts being the ones to follow here. Now that Destruction is involved, I don't think walking away and assuming we can safely evacuate the city as a backup plan is still on the table. This is

getting that full-blown, save-the-day, god-level-enemy feel. Like the One Day War in the Storm Kingdom or some of the stuff on Earth."

"So, what are you saying?"

"That sometimes you have to take the big risk. But you don't do it blindly. I'm going to sneak through the enemy, talk with this Beaufort bloke, and we'll see how it goes from there."