

Chapter 692

Teaching Moment

Messengers and adventurers alike were rushing towards Jason. For the highest-ranked people, traversing the city was not a lengthy exercise, and the diamond-ranker adventurers pursuing Mah Go Schaat arrived first.

The diamond rankers were both elves, a man and a woman. Her name was Allayeth and his was Charist. What they found was Schaat's corpse, dissolving into rainbow smoke. A sharp-featured silver-ranker was extracting and devouring the remnant life-force. As he drained the diamond-ranker's power, a dark shape looming over him grew more and more distinct. It was quickly becoming void black, speckled with stars.

"Star phoenix," Allayeth whispered. She had heard of them but not seen one; they were creatures of the wider cosmos, not native to Pallimustus.

"What's going on here?" Charist demanded.

"I just got food delivery," the silver-ranker said. "You know how it is: You're fighting a battle, you get peckish but you don't have time to cook."

He gestured at the monster-filled sky above them.

"Because of the battle, obviously," he continued. "I have to say, I was hesitant about raw messenger, but it was totally worth going diamond-rank. There really is satisfaction to be found in top-quality product."

"You're making jokes?" Charist asked incredulously.

"You get used to it," another silver-ranker called out. "Sorry about him."

This was a dark-skinned and extremely handsome human. He and a third silver-ranker had backed off from the intensity of the dead diamond-ranker's aura. The man devouring the life energy from the corpse seemed unaffected. A glimpse at his aura revealed that it was the same one that had been projected over the city, sending the messengers and their summoned monsters into a frenzy.

The first man turned around to shout back at him while still draining the immense life force of the messenger.

"Don't apologise for me!"

"Then don't be rude," the handsome man called back. "These are busy people with a lot going on right now. They were probably chasing whoever that messenger you're eating was."

"I'm not eating him! Look, the life force is going in through my hand."

"If you want to avoid having to explain that you don't eat people so much, maybe don't make food delivery jokes."

"Okay, that is fair," the first man acknowledged.

The two diamond-rankers shared a confused look. They were used to the silent adoration of silver-rankers, who were honoured simply to be in their presence. It was the reaction they were getting from the third silver-ranker, an elf. She looked equal parts in awe of them and horrified at the other two. The diamond rankers turned to her.

"What is your name, adventurer?" Allayeth asked her.

"Elseth Culie, Lady Allayeth."

"A local girl," Charist said. "Your father is known to me. Convey my regards."

"It will be his honour and mine, Lord Charist," Elseth said, bobbing her head nervously.

"What is happening here?" Allayeth asked.

"This man is called Miller, although I don't think that is his true name. He and his familiar worked a ritual using some manner of magic I have never seen before. Then the messenger arrived, dead, moments before you. Miller proceeded to drain its life force."

"I do appreciate you turning up," Miller said cheerfully. He was still draining silver-gold life force, the messenger's reserves seeming limitless, even in death.

"Should we stop him?" Charist asked his companion.

"No," Allayeth responded. "It is unlikely that a silver-ranker can keep the messenger dead," Charist said, "but it will likely be some time before the messenger reconstitutes if his life force is drained entirely."

"Will the silver-ranker be able to hold all of that power?"

"He shouldn't be able to contain what he's taken already, yet he seems unperturbed. I imagine one of his essence abilities allows his life force reserves to expand when he drains excess."

"Yep," the man going by Miller announced. "I guess I'm no mystery at all to you lot."

They looked at him draining the power of a diamond-ranker whose seemingly instantaneous death at his feet remained wholly unexplained. He was wearing a cloak that matched the starry void of the star phoenix image forming above his head.

"If the messenger is dead," Charist said, "then we are free to go after their gold-rankers."

"A lot of their gold-rankers are coming here," Allayeth pointed out. "Our presence is the only reason they haven't arrived already."

“So, what’s it going to be?” Miller asked them. “Are you going to use me as bait and clean up the gold-rankers that come after me? I’ve been bait before, it’s cool. You should probably run around, intervening where the fight’s not going so well for our side, though. If you do, I’d appreciate you leaving us some gold-rankers to fend off theirs.”

Allayeth looked thoughtfully at Miller but spoke to Charist.

“He’s got a point. I was inclined to, as he said, use him as bait, but killing gold-rankers isn’t why we’re here. The priority is defending the city.”

“Very well. Miller, or whatever your name is. You’ll have some questions to answer when this is done. I will redirect enough gold-rankers here to achieve parity with the incoming messenger forces, but no more than that. It is a large city and this is far from the only battleground.”

“Tell me about it. I’ve got a pyramid with a bunch of gold-rank messengers in one room and a bunch of civilians in another. I’m a quirky neighbour and thirty minutes of wacky hijinks short of a hit family sitcom. Oh, I think this bloke is finally running low.”

The diamond rankers watched as the last of Mah Go Schaat’s corpse dissolved into rainbow smoke. Miller finished draining the energy, the image above him now seeming completely solid. It shrank down, sinking into Miller’s body.

Jason had drained a lot of life force over the last few years, including from messengers. None of it prepared him for what came out of the diamond-ranker.

“Are you alright?” Rufus asked. He was able to move closer now that the remnants of the messenger and the two diamond-rank adventurers were gone. Some of the messenger’s aura remained, an echo of his formidable power, but it was fading fast.

“I’m good,” Jason said, his expression wide-eyed manic.

“It’s just that you look a little intense. Like you’re on something that maybe you shouldn’t be.”

“Yeah, that checks out,” Jason told him. “That guy’s life force was like mainlining distilled lightning. In a good way.”

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- You have drained life force using [Blood Harvest].
 - Health, mana and stamina have been replenished.

 - You have exceeded maximum levels of life force, stamina and mana.
 - Ability [Sin Eater] has temporarily increased your maximum levels for life force, stamina and mana. These maximums will decline over time.

 - You have gained multiple instances of [Blood Frenzy].

- Maximum instances of [Blood Frenzy] have been reached. Additional instances will be converted into [Blood of the Immortal].
 - You have gained multiple instances of [Blood of the Immortal] from [Blood Harvest].
 - You have absorbed physical matter with inherent spiritual properties.
 - You have accumulated sufficient spiritually active matter to enter a star phoenix state.
 - Current star phoenix state availability: 1.
 - Next star phoenix state readiness: 14.8%
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“What was that bird thing?” Rufus asked.

“A visual representation of my ability to self-revive,” Jason said. “I’ve got another resurrection in the chamber, now. I’m just hoping I don’t get crushed to death by a chunk of falling building and have to use it right away.”

Jason and Rufus looked at each other, then both turned their gazes slowly upwards.

“It’s fine,” Rufus said with relief. “Still just a bunch of monsters. But there’s something going on up there. It’s hard to tell through all the monster auras.”

“It’s gold-rankers,” Jason said. “They’re all clashing in the sky already. The team is dropping down through that, so I hope they’re okay.”

“It’s getting rough out there,” Humphrey said. “Lindy, time to pull out one of your tricks.”

“I’ll try and clear up a path, sure,” Belinda said. “Get over to the edge.”

Humphrey moved to the open side of Onslow’s shell and Belinda conjured a massive, heavy plate into his hands. It was as large as Onslow’s shell itself and Humphrey had to brace his feet so the weight didn’t tip him out. Belinda used her Pit of the Reaper ability on it and Humphrey tossed it down with all his considerable strength. If he hadn’t, it wouldn’t have been able to outpace the plunging shell.

The plate dropped vertically, its surface containing an aperture to a dark dimensional pit. Tentacles darted in and out, snatching anything they could reach and yanking it into the void. Monsters, messengers and adventurers alike sensed it coming and moved out of the way, clearing Onslow's shell for an unmolested descent.

This went well until they were closing in on the ground and a messenger directed monsters to swarm the shell, clamping onto it. They ignored the wind barrier that scraped at them as if they were pushing themselves into a wheat thresher. Onslow was forced to a halt and even more monsters piled on. That was when Neil used his Reaper’s Redoubt

power. The team were all drawn into a safe dimensional space as death energy flooded a massive area centred on their original position.

Onslow's shell and its occupants reappeared in a cleared airspace, the survivors of Neil's ability having fled. Many didn't make it, having already been afflicted with Sin from Jason's aura, making them vulnerable to necrotic damage. The shell descended once more, finding the battle on the ground as frenetic as the one in the air, if not more so.

The monsters that were still on task continued to dig into the earth of an entertainment district that had become unrecognisable. It was now little more than rubble and excavated pits, monsters digging as adventurers fought not just them but also the messengers.

Most of the silver-rank messengers that had arrived were operating at or near ground level, fighting with savage abandon. After spending much of the battle holding back, they were mad with zeal as they sought out Jason and fought anyone who impeded their search.

Jason was teleporting across the battlefield so as to spread out the messengers pursuing him. He led them around the ruins of the entertainment district and into the path of scattered adventurers. The gold-rankers of both sides remained in the air, countering each other as they had for much of the battle. This left the main battle to the silver-rankers, but the golds could not be ignored. Every so often, a gold from one side or another would fire off a powerful attack or even break loose, attacking some silvers before returning to the fight above.

Jason wasn't just fleeing as he shadow-jumped back and forth. He frequently doubled back on messengers that he'd already led into adventurers. Between their distraction and his surprise attacks, he was able to swiftly leave a slate of afflictions before most had time to react. Enhanced by Blood Frenzy, Jason's speed outstripped most silver-rankers.

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- **[Blood Frenzy] (boon, unholy, stacking): Bonus to [Speed] and [Recovery]. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, up to a maximum threshold.**
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Even with his enhanced speed, Jason was still taking hits. This was partly because he went rampant, ignoring wounds and incoming attacks in pursuit of getting as many afflictions laid on as possible. The gold rankers were not entirely out of the fight either, with one firing a long-range assassination power that caused Jason's head to explode. He was staggered but didn't stop, still swinging his sword through the brief moment it took his head to grow back. The life force flooding his body made him, for the immediacy, all but

unkillable. Not only was he flush with life force from draining Mag Go Schaat but he also was gaining more as he went.

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- [Blood of the Immortal] (boon, healing, unholy, stacking): On suffering damage, an instance is consumed to grant a powerful but short-lived heal-over-time effect. Additional instances can be accumulated but do not have a cumulative effect.
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While he did manage to swing his sword without his head, the precision was significantly lacking. More frustrating for Jason was waiting for his mouth to grow back and he yelled out a battle cry the moment it was restored.

"Tis but a scratch!"

"Maybe draw less attention to yourself," Rufus suggested through voice chat.

"No idea what you're talking about," Jason responded innocently.

"Someone just blew up your head!"

"No, they didn't."

"I just watched it happen."

"It was just a flesh wound."

"Yes. The flesh of your entire head."

"I've had worse."

The messengers pursued Jason around the battlefield as monsters continued their directive to dig their way down. Adventurers like Elseth Culie were working to stop them, but the messenger presence made crucial demands on their time. More often than they would like, they were forced to face messengers instead of clearing the monsters from their assault on the underground bunker.

Slowly but surely, the messengers were boxing Jason in. Had their minds not been clouded with zeal, they might have wondered how they were managing to herd someone who could teleport that freely. When Jason decided enough of them were in range, he used his Feast of Absolution power.

From across the battlefield, the life force of the messengers lit up, as Jason revoked all the afflictions that had built up on them. Even the ones he never faced had gained afflictions for each attack they made against an adventurer. Poison, disease and unholy power were drained from all of them, bruise-coloured lights of sickly green, bruise purple and ugly yellow. The afflictions flowed through the air on streams of silver-gold, matching the life force of the messengers. From above, Jason looked like an eldritch spider, draining his victims through his arcane webs.

In the place of the removed afflictions, inside Jason's enemies, he left the blue, silver and gold glow of transcendent power. It ate them from the inside, irresistible and all but unstoppable.

Jason was not the only adventurer making a good showing for himself. Rufus was on a rampage, finally triggering his zone magic that turned the sky over the battlefield dark, lighting it up with a false moon. Containing all the power Rufus had been building up since the start of the battle, it fired beams of immense power, crippling or outright killing messengers. He only managed a few shots before the power was gone, but his display roused the adventurer morale. Seeing a solid win heartened the adventurers to push back against the zealot messengers.

Seeing their forces being overpowered, the gold-rank messengers issued a directive. The raging zealots weren't doing a lot of listening, but this was an order that suited their current state just fine. From the start of the battle, the adventurers had been wary of the isolating duel powers the messengers possessed. All of a sudden, all of the messengers that had them, which was most, used them all at once.

Just before they did, a gold-rank messenger had taken note of Onslow's shell. Half of Jason's team was using it as a bunker, even inviting a few glass-cannon adventurers to join them. The messenger broke free of his opponent and dropped on the shell like a hammer. It broke apart, sending adventurers scattering just as the silver-rank messengers were launching their duel powers.

Only those standing alone could be targeted, or the isolation powers failed. Humphrey and Jason were both hit, while Sophie dodged and found Belinda, causing the messenger targeting her to waste his power. Neil was grabbed by Stash, in the form of a hopping insect that pulled him out of a messenger's path.

Clive landed hard after Onslow's shell shattered. His arms wrapped around Onslow's humanoid form, whimpering from having his shell smashed apart. A messenger found him like that and activated his challenge power, drawing them into a dimensional space. It was clearly an artificial area, consisting of a flat white circle, floating in a void.

Clive looked up, dazed, just as a spear came down and skewered Onslow through the head.

"Face me, human."

Clive pushed himself to his feet with his staff, his wand having been lost somewhere in the breaking of Onslow's shell. He looked down at his dead familiar, the vulnerable humanoid form having not resisted the messenger's spear.

“No familiar,” the messenger sneered. “One look and I can see that you are a weak spell caster. You will never leave this place.”

Clive looked up at the messenger, blank-faced, then again down at Onslow.

“Sentimental,” the messenger mocked, then lunged with his spear. Clive’s staff shifted, the spear slid along it, the messenger slightly off-balance. The end of the staff slipped between the messenger’s legs and Clive gave it a little leverage that turned the hovering charge into an ugly tumble.

Clive didn’t follow up as the messenger floated to his feet, more hurt by the indignity than landing on the ground. Clive looked at him, blank-faced, took out a recording crystal and tossed it into the air.

“I need to record this,” he told the messenger, his voice flat and emotionless. “It’s going to be a teaching moment.”