

Chapter 761

Surplus to Requirements

Jason lay spread across a rock like deeply unpleasant jam. Colin, in an incomplete apocalypse beast form, continued battling the gold-rank spider mole. Leeches had crawled onto the monster's body, moving between the stiff, venomous bristles and biting into flesh, draining health and delivering afflictions.

The monster flailed with surprise and rage, distracted from Colin's flesh mass continuing to take shape below it. A slit formed in the mound and opened like an eyelid, but instead of an eye, it was filled with rows of jagged shark teeth.

Ropey tendrils shot out of the maw, themselves having smaller mouths on the end. They looked like smaller, dark red versions of the wall worms and their teeth buried themselves in the flesh of the spider mole. They ignored the bristles they impaled themselves on, draining blood to replenish what leaked from the wounds.

The spider mole immediately started fighting back. Still anchored to the wall by three of its legs, the remaining five slashed at the tendrils and the flesh mound from which they had emerged. Gold-rank claws carved troughs into the silver-rank flesh of Colin's still-coagulating form.

Colin healed swiftly by draining health from the spider mole, shooting more tendrils to replace those severed by the monster's claws. Even so, Colin was being torn up faster than he could heal. His apocalypse beast form hadn't finished taking shape, and with all the health it drained going to regeneration, the transformation halted, incomplete. Even with Colin inheriting Jason's ability to ignore the suppressive effects of rank disparity, the power difference between gold and silver-rank was just too great.

Jason had been painted across a rock jutting out of the stone wall. He snapped back to consciousness as his body snapped back into shape, consuming most of his remaining life force surplus.

The rest had already been squeezed out of him by the spider mole before tossing him aside.

Groggy from the rapid succession of bodily destruction and reconstruction, he peeled himself out of the gore staining the rock and floated into the shaft using his aura. Still overloaded on mana the way he no longer was with life force, he reconjured his Cloak of Night. His robes technically weren't his to conjure but a fresh set draped over his body and immediately absorbed the blood coating him. It was Colin who created the robes, the swarm entity still partly existing inside Jason.

Jason never let Colin fully emerge, always keeping a portion of his biomass in reserve. This way Colin's vessel could never entirely be destroyed. That small amount of extra biomass was separate from the strategic reserve Jason maintained in his soul realm as well. That was excess that Colin couldn't keep or use after overfeeding.

Jason had started claiming that excess for himself, storing it up to return to Colin at need. They had even taken the time to build up a stock before the expedition, knowing they would probably have a use for it. Seeing how much damage Colin was going through, that would clearly be the case.

Jason shook his head to clear it and expanded his senses to take stock of the situation. Colin was fighting a losing battle against the spider mole, but it seemed like the monster had forgotten the researchers and Jason, focused fully on Colin. Then Jason noticed something that left his face twisted with anger.

"What are you doing?" he snarled at the gold-ranker floating in the air nearby. The thick cloud of silver lights shimmering around the bottom half of her body reminded Jason of a cartoon genie.

"So you are still alive," the gold-ranker said, hands clasped casually behind her back as she floated in the air. "I thought as much, despite your condition, given that your familiar's vessel remained intact. Although not for long, it would seem."

Her name was Valetta, one of the members of team Moon's Edge. Her aura was restrained to avoid the spider mole's attention.

"Why are you just floating there?" Jason asked.

"I wanted to see if you could win. All this talk about the mighty astral king; I wanted to see what the fuss was."

"At least save the research team!"

She glanced over at the researchers, dangling from shadow arms sticking out of the wall. They were out of range of the spider mole's fight with Colin, but not so far that the monster couldn't be on them in moments.

"It stopped bothering with them," she said. "Besides, saving them was what you were ordered to do, not me."

"I'm guessing you were ordered to help me, though?"

"Yes. And if I'm sure you'll need it, I will. Your familiar is holding on much better than I expected, even if it isn't going to win."

Jason held back a snarling retort, turning his attention back to the researchers. They didn't have any flying devices on them but they weren't helpless, either. Jason reconfigured the shadow arms to give them what amounted to a ladder to give themselves

more distance. The next priority was to keep the spider from finishing Colin and going after them or him.

The spider mole was definitely worse for wear, looking emaciated from the life-draining that had kept Colin in the fight. Colin looked far worse, his incomplete apocalypse beast utterly savaged by the monster's claws. The original mass of flesh had been torn to ribbons and he was no longer capable of sending more tendrils to drain life. Without them, he was not going to last much longer.

For a long time, Jason had instinctively gesticulated when using various powers, but it wasn't truly necessary. He didn't need to point his hand at a thing to move it with his aura or target it with a spell. Jason didn't move as he drew on his power, floating motionless in the air. Only his eyes moved, blazing rage from within the darkness of his hooded cloak.

Jason's soul realm portal opened in the air above Colin and the monster, hovering in the air as a horizontal ring. The sheet of energy inside the ring flickered and stuttered, the elemental forces in the ambient magic attempting to make it explode. Jason grimaced as he tapped into his astral gate to reinforce the portal's dimensional integrity. The flickering stopped and the portal snapped solidly into place.

Jason called on the strategic reserve of biomass he kept in storage and dumped it out through the portal. It geysered down in a deluge of thick and viscous fluid; red, purple and sickly white, all mixed together. Somewhere between blood and molten flesh, it gushed over Colin and the spider mole, painting them in gore.

The meat soup looked like it should be splashing off them and continuing down the shaft like a waterfall, but not so much as a single drop was wasted. Instead, it curved through the air or crawled off the spider mole to inundate Colin, completely obscuring him in the liquefied flesh.

Despite Colin's obfuscation, the spider mole didn't let up its attacks, legs delving into the deluge to slash blindly with shovel-sized talons. It started shrieking as it did, whether in fear, pain, rage or all three, Jason couldn't tell. As the gore rained down on them both, the monster kept flailing in a frenzy.

As the downpour finally started to slow, a tree-trunk arm emerged from the meat waterfall. It had no skin, just ropey muscle shining wet from the thick fluids painting it. At the end of the arm was a hand with eight fingers, each terminating in a dark heavy claw. The hand reached out and grabbed the rock wall, fingers easily digging into the stone.

The spider mole immediately lashed out at the arm, only for another to emerge and intercept the attack. A third limb and fourth came into view as the downpour from above

slowed and finally came to a stop. Colin's full form was revealed as he absorbed the last of the liquid.

Colin's body was an uneven sphere, ugly and lumpen like a tumour. No longer adhered to the wall of the shaft, he was held in place by three of his eight arms, the same as the spider. His arms jutted from his round body at seemingly random positions, with no sense of up and down or left and right. Between the limbs, eye-shaped mouths covered much of the remaining body, ringed with hooked, jagged teeth.

The mouths let out an alien shriek that scraped against the soul in a horrifying aura assault. The soul attack combined the immense power and domineering cosmic authority of Jason's aura with the sanguine horror's infinite alien hunger.

The screech gouged at the senses, leaving only Jason unaffected. The spider mole flailed and shrieked back at Colin in panic. The researchers screamed and tumbled from where they'd been climbing the walls, shadow limbs once again grabbing them before they fell. Even the gold-ranker, Valetta, was visibly shaken.

Despite being taken aback, the gold-rank monster didn't flee but lashed out with renewed freneticism, its legs a blur as they thrashed at Colin. Despite Colin's now-complete form, there was still no getting around the difference in rank and the spider mole took large chunks out of him. Even so, Colin was better able to fight back, reconstituted and reformed while the monster was still drained and afflicted from earlier.

Fresh tendrils shot out of Colin's mouths to clamp onto the monster's flesh and resume draining it, sustaining Colin for the fight. The spider mole slashed at them with its claws but had less success than previously. Not only were they thicker and tougher, but Colin's arms ran interference. It wasn't enough to keep them from being severed, but it slowed the process down.

Jason closed the portal to his soul realm, only a little worn down from tapping into the astral gate to maintain it. He floated past Valetta as he opened a voice channel to Miriam just long enough for a simple message.

"You can call your team member back," he said. "She's surplus to requirements."

Jason vanished and reappeared on the spider mole's back, shadow arms reaching down to anchor him to the bucking monster. He reached down to draw his sword, still buried in the monster's back from when the spider mole had grabbed him. The monster didn't seem to notice, caught up in the battle with Colin. To a massive gold-rank body, already brutalised, withered from life drain and covered in rotting, bleeding ulcers from Colin's afflictions, a sword wasn't especially impactful.

Jason immediately made use of those afflictions, casting a spell.

“Suffer the cost of your transgressions.”

The Punition spell created an immediate surge of necrotic damage for each of the dark afflictions on the target. The Monster’s flesh rapidly rotted, turning a dark and hideous yellow. Its spiky hair, weapons in themselves, turned brittle and crumbled or fell out entirely. Even so, the fortitude of a gold-rank monster was so outrageous that the damage was still far from enough, not even slowing it down.

Jason's powers were extremely mana efficient and his mana pool, like his life force, could be extended well past his default maximum. This meant that he had a large supply to use on his one mana dump spell. Punition normally had a thirty-second cooldown, but ramping up the mana cost could reduce that or even remove it entirely. He left the first casting with a ten-second cooldown, giving him time to cast a few other quick spells and make some special attacks.

None of this fazed the monster who continued to view Colin as the threat. The spider mole still had the power advantage, but the tide was slowly turning as the monster weakened under the blood draining and afflictions. The pace was glacial, however, another reminder of the absurd resilience of gold-rankers.

With additional afflictions in place, Jason’s spell came off cooldown and he started using it over and over, dumping massive amounts of mana into removing the cooldown entirely. Doing so also gave a much shorter incantation.

“Suffer.”

“Suffer.”

“Suffer.”

Miriam Vance was caught up in the latter stages of the larger spider mole fight, the monsters finally starting to drop in number. Gold-rank monsters, even the less threatening ones, just took so much killing before they’d go down. Even so, she couldn’t help but notice the bizarre magic and auras she was sensing from the direction of the magic researchers. She’d gotten an odd message from Asano suggesting the gold-rank monster was handled, and now that she had a spare moment she focused her senses in that direction.

Miriam's eyes went wide as she sensed what was possibly the most horrifying thing she'd encountered in her career. The aura alone coming out of it made her senses flinch, but there was something familiar within it as well. Her face paled as she realised that *thing* was Asano’s familiar. As for Asano himself, he was riding the back of the monster, tied down to it with shadow arms as he chanted a spell over and over.

Finally, she sensed Valetta, safely backing away, restraining her aura to not get caught up in the fight. Miriam could also sense the researchers nearby, hanging from more shadow arms that had to be Asano's doing. Valetta only watched the fight instead of going to rescue them or help Asano and Miriam's expression tightened with rage.

Many essence users had power sets that resulted in combat having stages if it went on long enough. Their battles could be almost narrative in structure and, for Jason, that narrative was oddly religious. At the beginning came sin. Pestilence, poison and unholy power. Then came absolution.

"Feed me your sins."

The spider mole's life force shone from within its body, the natural red almost entirely obscured in the ugly colours of affliction. All that taint flowed out of the monster filling the air with sickly yellow, purple and blue light, so thick that Jason was completely obscured for a moment. As the poisons, curses, diseases and unholy afflictions departed the monster's life force, they left something behind in their place.

After absolution came penance. The monster's body lit up with bright light, the transcendent damage of the Penance affliction. Unstoppable, unavoidable. All but inescapable. It went to work on annihilating the monster from the inside out.

Even through all of that, the gold-rank monster continued to endure. But Jason wasn't done. His Doom Blade power involved conjuring weapons, but his soul-bound blade, Hegemon's Will, could absorb the abilities of those conjured swords instead of having them manifest. Jason held out his sword, red runes pulsing down the length of the black blade. Jason used his power and the runes turned from red to a clean, radiant blue.

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- You have invoked the effects of [Penitent, the Blade of Sacrifice]. All properties of that weapon have been imbued into [Hegemon's Will]. Disruptive-force damage will be inflicted in addition to physical damage.
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The second form of Jason's Doom Blade was double-edged in more ways than one as the Price in Blood affliction increased the damage Jason and the monster dealt to each other. It was always a risk to employ, but the monster was occupied fending off Colin. For all that Jason was ravaging the spider mole with his powers, Colin was the one eating it.

Every blow from Jason's blade made the damage grow. Every strike not only escalated the Price in Blood but also delivered the special attack, Punish. In the beginning, Punish had been a tool of necrosis and sin, but the story of Jason's battle had changed.

Ability: [Punish] (Sin)

- Special attack (melee, curse, holy).
 - Cost: Low mana.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Silver 5 (42%).

 - Effect (iron): Inflicts necrotic damage and the [Sin] affliction.

 - Effect (bronze): Inflicts or refreshes the duration of [Price of Absolution].

 - Effect (silver): If the target has any instances of [Sin] they suffer an instance of the [Wages of Sin] affliction. If the enemy struck has no instances of [Sin] but does have instances of [Penance], they do not suffer [Sin] or [Wages of Sin]. They instead suffer transcendent damage from this ability in place of necrotic damage and suffer an additional instance of [Penance]. Instances of [Penance] do not drop off for a short period.

 - [Sin] (affliction, curse, stacking): All necrotic damage taken is increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

 - [Price of Absolution] (affliction, holy): Suffer transcendent damage for each instance of [Sin] cleansed from you.

 - [Wages of Sin] (affliction, unholy, stacking): Suffer necrotic damage over time. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

 - [Penance] (affliction, holy, damage-over-time, stacking): Deals ongoing transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, dropping off as damage is dealt.
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Jason used a holy weapon to smite the monster with a holy attack. Over and over, blow after blow, the damage grew with every strike. Jason entered an almost zen-like state, a combat trance. He rode the wild thrashing of the monster, his body going with the flow. His senses expanded, taking in his surroundings. He absently noted that some wall worms had emerged nearby, prompting Valetta to finally rescue the researchers.

Time blended into itself and Jason didn't know how long it had been when the monster showed signs of finally flagging. The seemingly unkillable monster began to crumble, proving that even gold-rankers had their limits. The spider mole grew weaker, taking an extra limb from the fight with Colin to clamp itself to the wall.

The monster became sluggish and unstable, no longer trying to take down the ravaged Colin but fight him off, desperate to escape. Colin didn't allow it, tendrils still buried in its flesh. The familiar was still not as strong but the gap had closed and Colin's arms were dug into the wall. This kept the monster held fast for Jason to finish the job.

For many essence users, their powers were a reflection of who they were. Humphrey's were strong and straightforward while Sophie's were swift, elusive and unassailable. Belinda's required clever invention while Clive's had a complexity requiring someone steeped in the underlying rules of magic.

Jason's powers were the ideals of faith from the culture in which he had been raised, turned into horrifying weapons. His enemies were sinners because he declared them so, then forced them into atonement by the sword. They were delivered into misery and suffering on the path to a slow, terrible demise.

Then came the end.

"Mine is the judgement and the judgement is death."

Jason's execute power was called Verdict and looked like the wrath of a righteous, unforgiving god. A great column of transcendent light poured down, leaving Jason and Colin unharmed as it excised the monster from reality, vanishing in a plume of rainbow smoke.

The light faded, leaving Jason floating in the air. His sword was held at his side, runes blazing with light through dripping ichor. His eyes shone in the darkness of his hood, an implacable, imposing figure. Then he noticed the two elementals about to touch and explode.

"Oh shi—"

Chapter 762

Pride

It was no longer possible to see the forest of worms down the shaft. The butterflies filling the space had turned it into a lake of glowing blue and orange. The expedition group were above it all in stone-shaped alcoves or on conjured platforms.

Jason floated over the centre of the shaft with frazzled hair and half his beard scorched off. Being crushed, impaled and smashed into walls had left his hair largely intact, but the explosion of fire in his face had not. Jason was perfectly capable of regenerating burnt flesh, but restoring his best physical feature required alchemical intervention.

As he watched the glowing lake below, Miriam Vance floated up to him, feet shrouded in a small gold cloud.

"It's going well," she said. After finishing the gold-rank monsters, the expedition extracted the crawlers and escaped up the shaft, leaving Jason to go to work.

"Why am I the only dedicated affliction user?" he asked. "A more traditional one would be more useful against these numbers."

"We weren't anticipating these numbers," Miriam said. "More importantly, the strengths and weakness of affliction specialists are well known. They're powerful, yes, but famously bad at self-reliance. They need teams around them. In fights like these where a messy ambush has us attacked from all sides, they'd be about as much use as the research team."

Jason didn't answer. Instead, he glanced over at Korinne Pescos and the rest of team Storm Shredder, in an alcove being debriefed by Amos Pensinata. They were a typical Rimaros team built around high-damage range specialists, originally two but now three with the addition of Zara. The rest of the team served to maximise their effectiveness.

The chaos of the ambush had been a hard lesson in the value of individual capability, the team coming close to losing people in the early stages of the fight. The silver-rankers had been largely sheltered in their progress through iron and bronze, and this journey was meant to season them to the harsh realities of adventuring. That was exactly what they had gotten, and Jason was confident they would grow from the experience. Their team mentor, Amos Pensinata, was making sure they took the right lessons.

After a long pause, Miriam spoke again.

"We need to talk, Operations Commander."

“Yes, we do,” Jason agreed. His voice was soft and sober with none of his usual joviality.

Miriam sighed and activated a privacy screen. It was an extremely high-end device that blocked sound and most forms of magical surveillance. It also blurred the interior to those looking on, preventing techniques like lip reading.

“Valetta,” she said.

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry. She’s my team member and it was my mistake. She’s the strongest person in the team, which is why I sent her. I knew she didn’t like you, but I never thought she’d do that to you.”

“It doesn’t matter what she did to me. I’ve been betrayed by the people I’m working with enough that I just expect it now. But she didn’t move to save the researchers until she absolutely had to. She’s one of the most powerful assets in this expedition and she was wasting time on a personal grudge.”

Miriam nodded.

“I overestimated her discipline and underestimated her dislike of you.”

“Where did that come from?” Jason asked. “I picked up that she didn’t think much of me when we did our expedition meet and greet, but that’s normal. People tend to like me a lot or hate me immediately, with not a lot of ground in between. But what she did goes beyond dislike. If that’s going to be a problem to this degree, she can’t be a part of this expedition.”

“It’s the way you act around Lady Allayeth,” Miriam said. “Or, more accurately, the way Lady Allayeth acts around you.”

“Oh,” Jason said. “You’re saying Valetta is—”

“Not like that. Lady Allayeth means a lot to us all, but she took Valetta out of...”

Miriam sighed.

“The particulars don’t matter,” she continued. “Suffice it to say that Lady Allayeth is the sun in Valetta’s sky. She isn’t jealous of you. She just thinks you’re unworthy of Lady Allayeth.”

“Allayeth and I aren’t—”

“You don’t have to be. We know her better than anyone. How she is around different kinds of people. And we’ve seen how she is around you.”

“Barely. You’ve seen us together, what? Twice?”

“It’s enough.”

Jason let out a long breath.

"If Valetta is a liability," he said, "She can't stay. Is she salvageable?"

"I think so. But she's a team member and a friend, so I'm biased. And I missed that she'd do what she did, so my judgement is clearly not what it should be on this. Whatever you decide to do, Operations Commander, I'll support it."

"Even if I decide to kill her?"

Miriam went very still.

"Is that something you're considering?" she asked.

"No."

"Then why would you even suggest that?"

"Because I wanted to see your reaction. You'd kill me before letting me have my gold-rank friends take her out, wouldn't you?"

"Yes. And you know if you try, this expedition is done, right?"

"I do. I just wanted to know that you'd go all the way for your team member. If she's worth that, then maybe she isn't a complete write-off."

"I'm not sure I like the way you do things, Operations Commander. Provoking people so you can gauge their reaction might get that reaction you're looking for, but they're still provoked."

"And I'm not sure I like where you put your trust, Tactical Commander. The wrong person in a critical role, you could kill us all."

They both nodded, each acknowledging the other's point.

"I'll talk with Valetta," Jason said. "I want a sense of where she's at."

"We can—"

"Just me," Jason said. "I need to know that she can respect my authority, not just yours."

"My understanding is that respecting authority isn't something you do well yourself."

"You're right. It's why I tend to avoid expeditions. But we're in the situation we're in."

"It's easier when you're in charge."

"Yes. That's not particularly fair, but if fair mattered, I wouldn't have a problem with authority."

Valetta was isolated from her team, standing alone in the plain alcove where Miriam had left her. Miriam's anger had been savage, only the privacy screen holding in the loud berating she had given. Valetta knew she'd gone too far. She'd didn't understand why everyone made such a fuss about Asano. Why was he placed on the same level as Miriam? Why would Lady Allayeth treat him like that?

She hadn't realised how much resentment had festered away until she found herself watching him fight that monster. She'd seen him hammered into the rock wall with a force that would kill most silver-rankers, and thought, for a moment that he was dead. When he got back up, she'd felt relief. If her pride had killed someone, that was not something she was sure she could live with. And if that person was the expedition leader, it would have been the end of her career, and rightly so.

But most of those thoughts had come after. In the moment, even as she was glad he lived, her pride wasn't done. She should have acted then. Done what she was ordered to do. But admitting she was wrong was hard, especially to someone of lower rank, and pride was always easier than humility. Only after the fact did she realise how badly she'd handled everything. How close she'd come to letting innocent people die. Asano didn't deserve that, whatever she thought of him, and the research team certainly didn't. It would have ruined her life, making her the only person who would have gotten what they deserved.

After the extraction, Miriam had come to find her immediately. At least she took Miriam aside and put up a privacy screen before verbally tearing strips off of her. Miriam's anger had cut Valetta to the core, but it was Lady Allayeth's disappointment she was dreading. More than anything, she wanted to live up to the potential the Lady had seen in her. To make the most of the opportunities she'd been given. If Lady Allayeth gave up on her, Valetta knew that would break her in a way she wouldn't come back from.

She sensed Asano's approach. He floated in, still scorched and dirty from the elementals that had exploded in his face. His hair was mostly burnt off, only seared, comical tufts remaining, yet there was nothing humorous about the thunder in his eyes.

He activated a privacy field, not through a device but by somehow making his aura block out sound. She's seen messengers do something similar to block sound attacks, but hadn't realised it was possible for anyone else. He moved like a messenger too, using his aura to push himself around.

"I want to apologise," she said.

"I don't care. I want to know if I can trust you."

"I won't do anything like that again."

"You shouldn't have done it the first time. Words are easy, and your actions tell a different story."

She nodded.

"You know that if anyone in the research team had died, we wouldn't be having this conversation," he said.

She nodded again.

"I... I don't know what to say," she told him. "It would just be words."

Jason nodded.

"No one died," he said. "But those researchers are shaken. Badly. If you'd gotten them out, they wouldn't have been that close to the fight. To the soul attack my familiar made. You felt it too, right?"

"Yes."

"Would you have liked to take that at silver-rank?"

"No."

"As of now, and until myself or the Tactical Commander says otherwise, you are responsible for the safety and wellbeing of the research team. Talk to Arabelle Remore and do everything she tells you. All you have to do is your job. Then, once we get back, maybe I suggest to Miriam that Allayeth doesn't need to hear about this."

Miriam's eyes went wide.

"Why?" she asked. "Why would you do that for me?"

"People were hurt. Traumatized. But no one died, which means you didn't screw up so badly that we have to get rid of you. That is only true, however, if you can demonstrate that you're an asset to this expedition, not a liability."

His expression softened, as did his tone when he continued.

"I know what it's like to make a mistake out of pride or self-confidence. To get others hurt. We don't deserve to be judged only by the worst things we've done. Not so long as we try to do better. But, just so we're clear, there won't be a third chance for you. This expedition is too important for that."

He dropped the privacy screen and floated out of the alcove, leaving Valetta alone.

Jason sat in his cloud chair over a platform conjured by Belinda. He let out an unhappy sigh as Shade rubbed hair-removal ointment into his scalp. He needed to excise the charred remains of his hair before using growth ointment to get it back.

Most of the team were sitting around, resting or checking equipment. Humphrey was off conferring with other team leaders and Jason knew he would be required soon. It was still the tactical commander's show right now, but he would be part of the discussion on moving forward.

"How do I have a headache?" he asked wearily. "My head doesn't have any of the things that can give you a headache in it."

"It's possibly psychosomatic," Shade suggested. "Would you like me to do your beard as well?"

"You should, bro," Taika said.

"It's bad?" Jason asked.

"It's basically a soul patch, plus a line running along your jaw. You look like an old child actor that hasn't gotten acting work since the nineties, was on drugs for a while but kicked it about ten years ago and is now super wholesome and in a Christian rock group."

"That sounds extremely specific," Jason said.

"Just a generalisation, bro. It would be weird if there wasn't someone like that."

"I'll take your word for it. How are the crawlers?"

"A lot of them took a beating, but Gary thinks if he cannibalises the worst one, we can get all the others up and running."

Jason sensed some nervousness in Taika's aura.

"You're uncertain about continuing on?"

Taika nodded.

"It's starting to feel like one of those movies where the expedition to do the important thing starts shedding people until the last, desperate survivors finally succeed at the cost of their own lives. Are we stealing the Death Star plans, bro?"

"I don't know, Taika. If you want to go back, I won't judge."

"Nah, bro. I'm in it as long as everyone else is. I'm just saying, if we were saving the city to stop everyone from dying, I would understand all this risk. But can't they move everyone and keep them safe?"

"Sure," Jason said. "The populace can be evacuated, but we're looking at a blast that makes most nukes look tame. Blackened skies and environmental devastation this world won't see again until it gets an industrial age. What really got me on board was the soul forge, though. I want it. I can't help but think there's a fight with the messengers coming. Something that goes beyond just this world and what they want here. I don't have any reason to think that, but I do. My instincts are screaming it, and Shade thinks my instincts are some kind of weird fate magic."

Jason let out a long sigh.

"If I'm right, and when that day comes, we need to be able to handle astral kings. Or at least have a chance."

"I'm going to be honest, bro: I don't know if I'm down for that."

"I know," Jason assured him. "Back to Earth, where you can take care of your mum. Don't worry, brother; I'll get you there or die trying. Or both. Probably both."

Chapter 763

The Greatest Enemy of All

The underground city of Cardinas was ruled from the Citadel of Pillars, if ruled was even the right word. It had been a harmonious place for centuries before the cultists and then the messengers burrowed down from the surface world. They had paid the price for their intrusion, each in their own way, but that was little comfort to those left living with the ramifications. Or dying with them.

The central room of the citadel's top floor had been the council chamber, but was now the war room. There was no council anymore, just Lorenn, the others having fought valiantly and died horribly. Anything organic the elemental messengers got their hands on was fed as compost to their perverse tree.

Lorenn had seen the tree in that early battle where they had come so close to victory, only to fall disastrously short. That was when they had the numbers and the territory to mount an offensive. Now the elemental messengers had both and what remained of their populace had only a losing battle for survival.

The other cities were lost, as was most of Cardinas. Less than ten thousand of the Brightheart Smoulder had survived yet that fraction felt so large crammed together in the citadel cavern, especially with the cultists taking up their own space.

Lorenn stood alone in the middle of the room, the heidelshoe-shaped desk arcing around her. In front of her was a model of the city, every cavern and tunnel. It tapped into the natural array to maintain a live depiction of the city's state, which grew increasingly dire with each cycle. Most of the map was covered in sickly green, the influence of the elemental messengers. It showed where the roots of their foul tree had burrowed through the rock and its vines crawled over every surface.

Lorenn looked up through the glass ceiling at the fire blazing across the ceiling of the cavern. It was said that the cycle of flaring and dimming reflected something called 'the sun' on the surface world, but that interested her not at all. The surface world had given them the cultists and messengers, so it could keep any other horrors it had to itself.

One side of the double doors swung open to admit Marla. Marla was a fire aspect, her skin markings, eyes and even hair the yellow-orange of steel in a forge. With the bold glow against her dark skin, she was extraordinarily beautiful. Lorenn had always been jealous, the smoky greys of her own ash aspect being far less appealing. Marla was a physical embodiment of what it meant to be a Brightheart.

“Councilwoman,” Marla said without preamble. “I’ve completed the assessment of our food supplies. With only two growth chambers left, we can only last a few weeks. A month at the outside.”

“Even with the new rationing levels?”

“Yes, Councilwoman. We need to—”

“We’ve talked about this, Marla. That discussion is over.”

“And so are we, Lorenn! We can’t feed our own people, let alone these cultists from the surface.”

“If not for those cultists, Marla, there would be no one left to feed. You think I keep our agreement with them out of honour? If you can tell me how to hold this cavern against the elemental messengers, I’ll cast them out myself.”

Marla glowered, then looked down, unable to meet Lorenn’s eyes as she voiced her suggestion.

“We’re trying to defend too much ground,” she said. “That’s why we are forced to ally with the cultists. If we retreat to the remaining growth chambers, our own forces are enough to hold them.”

“Those won’t fit more than a third of our remaining population. Less if we don’t want to overcrowd the chambers and their ability to produce food.”

“Yes,” Marla said, steeling her resolve to meet Lorenn’s eyes. “But those are numbers we will be able to feed.”

“At the cost of leaving most of our people to die.”

“If we do nothing, *all* of our people will die.”

Lorenn’s stoic expression cracked, tears welling in her eyes.

“All of our people will die anyway,” she sobbed. “I don’t see... I don’t know what to do!”

Marla was startled at Lorenn’s breakdown for a moment, then rushed forward to gather her in a comforting embrace. Lorenn stiffened for a moment, then leaned into Marla. Lorenn was uncertain how long they stayed like that, holding each other silently.

“Maybe...” Marla said before shaking her head and trailing off.

“What?” Lorenn asked.

“The hole the elemental messengers dug to the surface. Perhaps we could try and fight through and lead our people up.”

“No,” Lorenn said. “The tainted power of the natural array has the monsters and elementals in a frenzy. We couldn’t get past that with all the population in tow, even if we

somehow got them all past the elemental messengers. The only way to escape that way is if we took only our fighters and abandoned the populace entirely.”

Marla nodded. Neither had to say that they would die with their people before fleeing alone. They looked at each other, their expressions soft, only to harden at the approach of a familiar but unwelcome aura.

Lorenn had gathered herself together by the time Beaufort arrived. The elf was the head of the Cult of the Builder’s forces and their uneasy ally. The gold-ranker had given up his essence powers and was some manner of semi-artificial monstrosity, although he only revealed such on the battlefield. In his normal guise, that of a beautiful elven man with long blond hair, his aura revealed no such thing.

“Has Marla convinced you?” Beaufort asked.

“Of what?” Lorenn asked.

“Come, now, Lorenn. The choice may be hard but the calculation is easy. If you retreat to the growth chambers, you buy yourselves time and can abandon our uneasy alliance. All it will cost you is your honour and most of your people.”

“No, Beaufort,” Lorenn said. “Our alliance stands.”

“That’s good because I bring the single resource that we need the most yet possess the least.”

“What’s that?” Marla asked, her voice heavy with suspicion.

“Hope from above,” Beaufort said smugly.

“Your allies from the surface?” Lorenn asked, unable to keep the hostility from her voice. Despite their grave need, she could not bring herself to be happy at the prospect of more surface invaders.

“Not allies,” Beaufort said. “Not of mine. They’re enemies, including a man who is, perhaps, the greatest enemy of my Lord Builder on this planet. We call him the Defier.”

“Then why do you seem happy?”

“Because he will help us. It is his nature.”

“He’ll help you?”

“He’ll help you. He may keep us alive, albeit as prisoners, if only because we helped you first. Even if he kills us, it is better to die fighting an enemy of the Lord Builder than as mulch for the elemental messengers and their filthy arboreal project.”

“And how do you know this Defier is coming?”

“We call him the Defier because over and again he has kept our lord, the Builder himself, from obtaining that which he desires. He even stole some of the Lord Builder’s power. We felt him coming, likely when he used his aura in battle.”

“It sounds like he’s not your enemy,” Marla said. “Or that you aren’t his. It sounds more like he’s the enemy of your weird god and you’re just the flunkies he carves through.”

“The Builder is not some mere god,” Beaufort said, his tone a warning. “I will admit that the second part of your statement is not entirely without accuracy. The Defier has demonstrated a consistent ability to overwhelm our lord’s vassals.”

“How powerful is he?” Lorenn asked.

“That is a question with a complicated answer. In some regards, he is but a silver-ranker. In others, he may be the most powerful being on this planet.”

“How do we get him to be the second thing, then?” Marla asked. “One more silver-ranker won’t help us.”

“You might be surprised,” Beaufort said. “Many have underestimated the Defier and paid the price, even the Lord Builder. We left the astral space because we knew we would die there if we did not find a way out. We had hoped an alliance with you would be enough, but it was not. I am going to have to restrain my people to prevent them from attacking him on sight, yet I will put my faith in the Defier. The Lord Builder hates him, yet also acknowledges him. What you choose to do is, as always, up to you.”

Marla and Lorenn looked at each other.

“I will leave you to decide how to respond,” Beaufort said and gracefully withdrew.

Marla went and closed the door before discussing it with Lorenn.

“What do you think?” she asked.

“We can’t trust him,” Lorenn said.

“No. But he seemed oddly confident in an enemy.”

“It could be a ruse. Stopping us from abandoning the cult and holing up in the growth chambers.”

“Perhaps. But as that would be just prolonging the inevitable, is there anything to lose by waiting for this Defier?”

In the wake of the gruelling battle, the expedition was resting. Once the crawlers were back in acceptable shape, they would set out, but until then they were taking a well-earned break. On a conjured platform sticking out of the wall, Miriam was once again probing Jason with questions about astral kings.

“So, your familiars are Voices of the Will, like Jes Fin Kaal?”

“No,” Jason clarified. “Colin is a voice. Shade isn’t, but Gordon and Farrah are somewhere in the middle. They have a bond with me, but it’s not the full-blown connection of a voice. Farrah, can you let Miriam ID you?”

Farrah wandered over from her conversation with Clive to shake Miriam's hand.

Farrah Hurin

- Race: Outworlder (Human)
 - Essences: Fire, Earth, Potent, Volcano
 - Voice of the Will (Nascent)
 - Transition to Voice of the Will unavailable.
-

“Colin was only able to make the transition because he got a significant boost from eating the world-taker worm queen. That allowed him to overcome my shortcomings as an astral king by going through a metamorphosis.”

“I’m not going to become a messenger if I become your Voice of the Will, am I?”

Farrah asked.

“Colin didn’t,” Jason pointed out. “Besides, the process is voluntary. I won’t pressure you into going all the way. I’m all about consent.”

Farrah shook her head and wandered off, muttering about childish boys. Jason was about to resume his explanation when Amos Pensinata appeared in a blur of speed.

“I need a gold-rank team, no time to explain.”

Miriam raised an eyebrow at Jason who nodded confirmation. Miriam immediately started barking orders.

“Arabelle Remore! Your group is on Amos Pensinata. Right now!”

Amos became a blur once more, shooting off down the shaft. Arabelle, Gabriel, Emir and Constance followed a moment later.

“We need to know what that’s about,” Miriam said.

“Lord Pensinata has the best senses in this expedition,” Jason said. “I asked him to push out his range to see if he could pick up anything ahead of us. Looks like he saw something time-sensitive.”

“I’ll deploy a silver team to follow and relay information.”

“Yeah,” Jason said, suddenly morosely. “That’s a good idea.”

“What’s wrong? You disagree?”

“It’s not that, it’s just... you did the raising one eyebrow thing. I still have trouble getting it right. I’m meant to have all this perfect physiological control, yet I still can’t do it more than half the time. At best.”

She watched him wiggling his eyebrows with grim determination.

“You are a very odd man, Operations Commander.”

The messengers had better magic than was available on Pallimustus. This included the communications orb that Jes Fin Kaal had used to communicate with the powers of Yaresh while negotiating the expedition details. Another such orb was being used by three gold-rank men, further down the shaft beyond the expedition's location. One of them held it in hand as an image of a messenger floated over it, berating them.

"...not slowing them down enough, priest."

"They're your beacons," the man holding the orb said. "If the monsters they attract aren't good enough, what do you expect us to do? Import bigger ones?"

"We don't have the numbers to make our way down in force," the messenger said. "We have to navigate downwards with extreme care and patience. Even with the delays Jes Fin Kaal engineered, we will be pressed to set up in time. You need to slow them down more."

"And what exactly do you suggest?" the priest asked. "An arrow sign pointing up that reads 'this way down?'"

"Don't be flippant with me, priest."

"And don't you tell me to do something you have no idea how to accomplish, just because your plan isn't working properly. Or do you have any better—"

The priest dropped the orb and launched himself down the shaft mid-sentence. His two companions sensed the rapidly approaching gold-rank auras almost as fast and likewise fled, one of them snatching the dropped orb as he went.

Chapter 764

Taking the Position of a God

The expedition was waiting on the return of Amos Pensinata and the other gold-rankers that had taken off down the shaft. Jason and his companions sat around a pair of tables playing board games while they waited, discussing advancement to gold-rank. Glow stones floated above each table to light them up while a large privacy screen kept their conversation private. It also saved the rest of the expedition from Neil's loud complaining when games went badly.

"You're saying that it's basically what we thought," Neil said. "It's about how we relate to our essences. Is it my go? I'm playing the barracks."

Belinda groaned as he put down his card.

"Why do you always go with a military strat?" she complained. "You're the healer."

"Not in this game," Neil told her. "I'm allowed to play how I like."

"Yeah, Gold-rank is about the essences," Jason confirmed as he put down a card.

"I'm playing the west trading post."

"I think what we're looking for are specifics," Clive said. "That's what Allayeth shared with you, right? I'm playing an apothecary."

"Yeah," Jason said. "What it comes down to is the way that essences affect us."

"That's not a thing," Rufus said from the other table. "Don't tell me you've come around to that nonsense Anisa was hawking about essences tainting our pure souls."

"She wasn't right," Jason said, "but she wasn't entirely wrong, either, from what I'm told, and it gels with my own experiences. Essences don't impose themselves on our personalities when we absorb them. What they do is find aspects of our personalities that are already there, and that they resonate with. They then heighten those aspects over time, drawing out those parts of us and making them more central to our identities."

"I don't know if I buy that," Rufus said.

"I do," Humphrey said. "Essence users, especially adventurers, are all strong personalities. You could even say that the stronger the personality, the stronger the adventurer. I think what Jason is saying is that it's not so much changing who we are as concentrating the elements that make us who we are. Haven't you ever noticed how much people just seem to fit with their powers? Lindy's powers are twisty and versatile, Clive's are complicated and rely on magical knowledge. Neil's powers are understated, but with the chance to really make a show of things from time to time. His protection magic is oddly hostile but always there when we need it. Jason's powers are all at once elusive, flashy,

domineering and terrible, yet also merciful and benevolent. But always on his terms, and when he decides to put an end to something, it ends.”

“That doesn’t sound flattering,” Jason said. “But I think you’re right. I’ve been considering this a lot since Allayeth told me about this stuff, so let’s take me as an example of how an essence affects a person. When I first came to this world, I ended up in a knife fight with the first person I met. I accidentally killed him and I completely lost it. I wasn’t a violent person. The only fights I’d been in were children’s scuffles. So, when I killed the guy, I had a meltdown.”

“You’re talking about Landemere Vane,” Clive said.

“Yep,” Jason said. “If I was going to kill anyone he was a great pick, but that didn’t matter. I just lost it afterwards. Anyway, I ended up killing more people that day. All cannibal cultists, but I didn’t have a lot of time to think about it. It was all in a rush of action and I was concussed from multiple blows to the head. Plus, I was pretty sick from spirit coin over-use.”

“You’re lucky you were normal rank,” Sophie said from Rufus’ table. “I used a coin when we fought the Builder and his cult in the astral space. I was only bronze rank and I had to be carried up that tower. I’m going to move my guy here.”

She moved her teal Sobek miniature.

“You can’t end on a water space,” Humphrey told her.

“Yes I can, because it’s the big crocodile man. I can end on a water space and I count as being in all the zones he touches.”

“That doesn’t sound fair,” Humphrey complained.

“No, she’s right Humphrey,” Jason said. “Now, by the time everything calmed down that first day, I’d seen so much crazy stuff. Crossing realities, finding out magic was real, surviving an evil cult. Getting brain damage, getting healed from brain damage, seeing a kitchen full of chopped-up body parts. And I’d killed people. Again. A good handful of people. I was building up to another proper breakdown. But first thing the next morning, I absorbed the rest of my essence set.”

“You’re saying you became okay with killing because you got a bunch of evil powers?” Gary asked.

“Not exactly,” Jason said, “But kind of, I suppose. Since Allayeth told me about this stuff, I’ve been trying to explore it as I meditate. She said I won’t be able to sense those connections properly until I’m closer to the peak of silver-rank, but I think I’ve caught the edge of them.”

“Jason,” Humphrey said. “How are things going with the gold rankers?”

“Oh, come on,” Sophie complained. “You just want them to come back because you’re losing and you don’t want to merge with Rufus.”

“I hate the merge mechanic,” Rufus complained. “We should have just played *Blood Rage*.”

“I’m still halfway through repainting the minis,” Jason said.

“I thought Shade already painted them,” Rufus said.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “He painted them black, and now I have to paint them with actual colours.”

“I still assert they looked excellent,” Shade’s voice came from Jason’s shadow.

Jason extended his senses, punching through the interference of the element-laden ambient magic to observe the gold-rankers.

“They caught up with those three guys and they’re fighting now. Ooh, Rufus, your mum has some nasty abilities. And people say I’m the one with the evil powers.”

“My mother does not have evil powers,” Rufus insisted.

“Jason, we were talking about your evil powers,” Clive pointed out.

“Right,” Jason said. “So, I was shaken by killing people, and pretty moralistic about it, too.”

“He wanted us to not kill a bunch of Red Table cultists just because they were prisoners,” Gary said, shaking his head. “What else were we going to do? Spend a week hauling them across the desert, giving them who knows how many chances to escape, just so they could be executed in a city?”

“The point is,” Jason said, “my attitude changed. Swiftly and drastically, without me even noticing. It was only a few months later that the barge full of sand pirates came along, you remember? That was my first big expedition, and I killed a lot of people. I don’t even know how many. It was only afterwards that it even occurred to me to question it. I just went there and killed people because I was told to.”

“I remember that,” Farrah said. “We talked about it because you were worried you were turning into a bloodthirsty monster without realising it.”

“Bloodthirsty,” Jason echoed. “That’s the operative word. I’m convinced that it was my blood essence finding the parts of me that are capable of violence — we all have them, after all — and bringing them to the fore. Something else that Allayeth told me is that the essences don’t just amplify aspects of our personalities at random. It brings out the things we need. And what I needed, for better or worse, was a propensity for violence that my life to that point had never required. Suppressed, even. I was lucky enough to grow up in a culture where violence was neither needed nor wanted.”

“That’s definitely not the case here,” Neil said. “Still, you could have been a healer or something, right?”

“Sure,” Jason said. “I could have held out for different essences. But I took the ones I had, and they responded to that choice. I think it’s fairly obvious that my dark essence drew out my tendencies to deceive, obfuscate and confuse. My sin essence brought out the authoritarian tendencies that got Dominion’s attention.”

“How does that work?” Taika asked. “Shouldn’t sin bring out all the nasty parts of you? Making you all lazy and horny and murderous?”

“I’d say tyranny is pretty nasty,” Jason said. “Remember that the essence draws on my nature, meaning my understanding of sin. And sin isn’t about some objective right and wrong; it’s about transgression against a certain position on what’s right and what’s wrong. Good and evil. You can check any religious text for examples but, in this case, the position in question is mine.”

“Religious texts,” Neil said. “Because those positions you’re talking about are normally held by gods. Jason’s sin essence put his mind in a place where he’s taking the position of a god, arbitrating what constitutes good and evil.”

“Exactly,” Jason agreed.

“Wait, what?” Neil asked. “You’re agreeing with me?”

“You’re not wrong,” Jason told him. “The powers we awaken are a reflection of what our essences represent to us. Clive has been telling me as much since the beginning. People who attack me or my allies within my area of influence — within my aura — are literally burdened with sin.”

“This does fill in a lot of gaps,” Clive said, nodding thoughtfully. “Certain things make a lot more sense when looked at with this in mind. Especially around the way people try and cultivate specific power sets. Certain choices I’ve wondered about suddenly make sense if there was a gold-ranker who knows all this guiding the process.”

“Why is any of this restricted information?” Belinda wondered. “Is it that bad for people to know all this?”

“If this is true, then I was taught something that was explicitly wrong, by people who unquestionably knew better,” Rufus said. “I don’t think my parents were trying to hamper me. Maybe the knowledge too early somehow impedes advancement in the early ranks.”

“I think it’s more likely that it affects personal development than power development,” Jason said. “Although, all this suggests that it’s the same thing in many ways. Think about your mother, Rufus. She understands how people work better than most. I think she made

sure you thought your essences didn't affect your personality so you didn't get caught up thinking about it."

"You think that would be a problem?" Rufus asked.

"Absolutely," Jason said. "Look at me. One of the first things I asked the goddess of Knowledge was if magic changed the way I think. She said that my mind was my own, which I suppose is technically true if the essences use what's already there. She told me to remember that everyone changes, all the time, whether they're magical or not. I've been thinking about the changes I've gone through since becoming magical almost constantly. "

"He has," Farrah agreed. "Really, really a lot."

"And there's the problem," Jason said. "I've been obsessing over my behaviour, my choices and the changes I'm going through. And now my mind is extremely messed up. I think they keep this stuff secret because it's healthier to go through this process without constantly second-guessing everything you do."

"But now we're silver-rank," Clive said. "The changes our essences have wrought are largely settled. The high-rankers around us have been dropping hints about this stuff for a while because we're ready to start exploring it."

"That would explain some of the things my mother has been saying when I've spoken to her over water link," Humphrey said.

"Your mother has been hinting at weird stuff and you didn't wonder about it?" Neil asked him.

"She's always trying to nudge me in one direction or another," Humphrey said. "It's easier just to go with it."

"Not always," Sophie pointed out.

"Yes, not always," Humphrey said, his tone implying it was a much-repeated response. Jason narrowed his eyes, peering at them thoughtfully for a moment, then grinned.

"What?" Belinda asked him.

"I think Danielle is looking forward to grandkids," Jason said.

The gold-rankers returned to the expedition, landing on the largest stone platform. Expedition members swiftly gathered around them as Amos, Gabriel and Emir each dropped what was probably a person under all the blood. Arabelle conjured javelin-sized needles that pinned the prisoners to the floor, piercing all their limbs and their torsos several times each. She then conjured a transparent jar above each and red life force started trickling from the needles to fill the jars with red liquid.

“That will stop them from regenerating too fast,” she said.

“Bro,” Taika said to Rufus. “Your mum is kind of hardcore.”

Jason nudged Gary on the arm.

“You knew she could do this stuff right?” Jason asked.

“Yep,” Gary said.

“Then how am I the guy with the evil powers?”

“She’s prettier than you.”

“Thank you, Gareth,” Arabelle said. “That’s very sweet of you.”

“Gary,” Rufus said through gritted teeth. “That’s my mother.”

“Yeah,” Jason said, “but it doesn’t matter whose mother she is, or how prettily her dark chocolate hair tumbles down over her shoulders, that is a classic evil power right there.”

Rufus glared at Jason.

“Dark chocolate hair?” he growled. He was about to continue when Humphrey placed a commiserating hand on his shoulder.

“Don’t,” Humphrey said in a hollow, trembling voice. “Engaging only makes it worse. It doesn’t stop them, it doesn’t help. Nothing helps.”

Miriam and the rest of the expedition looked on, their levels of befuddlement relating directly to how well they knew Jason and his team.

“Operations Commander,” she said warily. “I recommend we move on to questioning the prisoners.”

“Right, yes,” Jason agreed, then panned a scolding look across his team. “You’re all being very silly during a serious time and you should all be ashamed.”

Neil opened his mouth to protest but was silenced by a gesture from Humphrey.

From the gold-rankers that had captured the prisoner, Emir’s wife and chief of staff, Constance, stepped forward. She held out a sphere that many recognised.

“That’s a messenger communication orb,” Miriam said. “Are these people working with the messengers or did they take it from one of the elemental messengers?”

“I’d ask,” Gabriel said, “but even after getting juiced like this, it’s not easy to get a gold-ranker to talk. We can all hold up to a lot of pain.”

“Not all pain is the same,” Amos Pensinata growled and everyone felt his aura surge.

Jason had learned a lot from Amos about how to effectively wield his aura, but not all the learning was one way. Jason had an aptitude for soul attacks from which Amos had learned a lot. With his even more powerful aura, the result was formidable. The reaction from the prisoners was not what anyone had expected, however.

The three bloody prisoners started screaming, but only for a moment. Amos' aura was thrown back dismissively, washing over the expedition in a twisted, chaotic form. Every silver-ranker other than Jason was staggered, some even falling over. The research team were the worst affected, but the wave swiftly passed. A new aura shrouded the prisoners, unmistakable in its divinity.

The auras of gods were both overwhelmingly powerful and extremely specific. Only the most neophyte iron-ranker, new to having aura senses, would fail to identify which god they were faced with. Even for a god they had never heard of, the nature of a deity was plain to see.

The god Destruction's voice rumbled like an avalanche.

"The souls of my priests are mine to toy with, not yours."

The force of the divine will pushed out like a wave. The silver-rankers scrambled away, abandoning the platform for others more distant. Even the gold-rankers backed off except for Amos, and even he looked strained. Only Jason was wholly unaffected, to his incredible surprise.

The gods impressing their will on Jason after he released many of their followers during the Reaper trials was one of his most formative experiences as a young adventurer. It had left him spiritually battered but ultimately became the first time that enduring spiritual tribulation led to his soul growing stronger. The gods had made him stronger the hard way, along with marking him with an echo of the divine.

Now that power washed around him like a river flowing around a rock. Jason probed with his aura, finding the divine will equally impervious to him as he was to it. Pushing back was less like a river moving around a rock than a droplet of water landing on a mountain, only to slide away unnoticed. But the feedback from his probe confirm one thing: he was not subject to the will of the gods any more than they were subject to his. His best guess was that his status as a nascent astral king had somehow excised him from their power, at least as they applied to mortals of the world they oversaw.

He had no doubt the gods could still affect him perfectly well within their sphere of influence. Knowledge would still know everything he knew, and if Destruction wished to destroy him, he could. But a general expression of divine power was not something by which Jason was influenced any longer.

Jason stepped up beside Amos but Destruction ignored him, as if he weren't there at all, facing off against Amos and his defiance of the god.

"What are your priests doing down here?" Amos growled.

“Whatever I will,” Destruction rumbled. “You and those pathetic winged creatures are squabbling like children, not realising that it is my palm on which you perform your petty dance. Do as you will, mortals, it matters not. My desires are inescapable.”

“For every one of your servants I find down here,” Amos threatened, “I will find one of your hidden temples when I’m done. I will raze them to the ground or bury them in whatever hole they’re concealed in.”

The god’s laugh was like thunder.

“You threaten the god of destruction with destruction? There is nothing you can do to me, mortal. Destroying my temples only fulfils their ultimate purpose. Annihilating my worshippers only aids them in providing their greatest service. There are always those hungry for power to replace them, more than I could ever need. Those who hunger for power, not to dominate but to destroy. To fight me is to lose before you begin.”

The god’s presence vanished and the priests exploded in a visceral mess. Jason used his aura to shield himself and Amos, creating a wedge of clear space behind them while the rest of the platform was painted red.

“Well,” Gabriel said, walking up as he pulled a vial of crystal wash from his potion belt to tip over his head. “That could have gone better.”

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.”

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.

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

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.

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.

Racial Gift: [Hero’s Sacrifice]

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

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.

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.
-

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.

-
- 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.
-

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?"

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.

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.

"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."