

Chapter 721

Explicitly Antagonistic

Jason and his team were not the only ones to capture some of the elemental messengers, although they were the ones to catch the most. Clive and Farrah's ritual cages were able to contain almost fifty of them, although the constructs would not last forever. The Adventure Society was sending containment vehicles in their direction, but in the meantime, all of the prisoners were being watched.

The cloud that had been choking the sky was now gone. The diamond-ranker, Charist, had created an air vortex that sucked up not just the cloud and the messengers inside it but a goodly number of the adventurers fighting those messengers. All of them were tossed into the upper atmosphere by Charist's potent vortex power.

On the ground, there was no shortage of adventurers, including those that had been tumbled around like clothes in a washing machine. Most of those had an unpleasant time being knocked around by the vortex, but through slow-fall or flight powers were able to return to the ground safely. The messengers had a less pleasant time of it as Charist killed most of them.

The absence of the cloud revealed a massive shaft descending into the earth, wide enough that a house could be dropped down it. The opening of the shaft was at the bottom of a hole made not by impact from above but explosion from below, making it less a crater than a massive exit wound.

Charist and Allayeth were discussing how he had approached the situation inside a privacy screen that both sealed off any sound and blurred the visuals just enough that no one could read their lips. Their body language remained obvious, however. Charist looked like a child caught doing something stupid by his mother as Allayeth jabbed her finger in his direction with every point she made. After talking about all the adventurers he had knocked around, she moved on to the messengers from the cloud that he hadn't killed.

"What inspired you to think that throwing them into space was a good idea?" Allayeth asked. "They can handle the cold, they don't need to breathe and they can fly. They're just going to come back."

"Then we'll kill them when they do."

"No, *you'll* go and find them now before they start showing up in little towns and villages across half the planet and killing everyone there."

"Find them? Do you know how big space is?"

"Unless you threw them to the moon, I don't see... you threw them to the moon?"

“Just a couple,” Charist mumbled. “You know I threw them because I was prioritising rescuing the adventurers.”

“Rescuing them from what?”

“From my air vortex.”

“You couldn’t have waited a little longer before using it?”

“How was I meant to know you were going to warn them all? It was something of an urgent situation, Ali.”

“Don’t ‘Ali’ me, Charist.”

“Fine. But you shouldn’t talk to me like this in front of the other adventurers.”

“They can’t hear us.”

“They can see me getting told off.”

“You won’t get told off if you don’t throw people to the moon!”

“We both know that isn’t true. Also, it was more *at* the moon than *to* the moon. It looks large, but hard to pinpoint from this distance.”

“At least tell me you didn’t throw them at the Mystic Moon.”

“No, it was the regular moon. Which is a point of reference, at least. Do you know how hard it will be to track people down if they’re randomly orbiting the planet?”

“Yes, Charist, I do. It’s the reason I don’t throw people into space. Much.”

“I don’t see why you are so up in arms about this.”

“Because it’s always the same with you, Charist. You drop in like an alchemy bomb and then leave me to clean up the mess. You insisted on taking the lead in dealing with Jason and you messed that right up. I had to step in and now everything is more complicated.”

“You cleaned up my mess, did you? You got no more answers out of Asano than I did. Do you even see what he’s doing right now?”

“Yes, Charist, I see it.”

“And you called him Jason.”

“That’s his name, Charist.”

“Are you sure you aren’t a little closer to Asano than you should be?”

“Charist, you are very powerful. When that’s what we need, that’s good, unless you start throwing messengers at the moon.”

“We don’t even know if any of them got there. It takes a lot of precision.”

“And you are a blunt object. You agreed to let me deal with J... Asano.”

“We shouldn’t have to deal with him. He’s a silver-ranker.”

“He’s more than just a silver-ranker, Charist, and I think you understand that.”

Charist peered at Allayeth in suspicion.

“You’ve had some success after all, haven’t you?” he accused. “When did you intend to share what you’ve learned with me?”

“Once I have something worth sharing. Asano has given me hints and implications, and little else. He’s wary, as you might expect after you essentially ransacked his home.”

“The man has too many secrets.”

“And you don’t?”

“No, Allayeth, I don’t. I’m not you. Are you sure you aren’t keeping things from me? Because I’m a ‘blunt instrument?’”

“Charist, you have no concept of how many things I’m keeping from you. Now, go chase down those messengers you threw. Why exactly did you not just kill them with the others? And don’t give that nonsense about saving adventurers because most saved themselves and you can kill a silver-ranker just as easily as throw one.”

“It’s fun tossing things into space.”

“That’s true,” Allayeth acknowledged. “But you need to make sure you’re throwing the right people. The one’s who’ll die.”

She pointed at the sky.

“Now go.”

“I don’t want to go to space,” he mumbled, earning him a raised eyebrow glare from Allayeth.

“Fine,” he grumbled, and then shot into the air with a rush of wind that sent up dust, dirt and debris for more than a hundred metres.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Allayeth said quietly after dropping the privacy screen. “I know you can still hear me, Charist.”

She turned to look at the ritual cages, their glowing golden light drawing attention. She moved in a blur to appear next to Jason.

“Don’t think I haven’t been watching what you’re up to,” she told him.

“What?” he asked innocently. “There are lots of adventurers watching the cages, not just me or even my team. Tell her, Korinne.”

Korinne bowed deeply.

“It is an honour to be in your presence, Lady Allayeth.”

“Well, that’s not helpful,” Jason complained.

“Jason,” Allayeth said, pointing at a portal arch. “What is that?”

“It’s a portal,” Jason said innocently.

“That would be one of your mysterious portals to places unknown.”

“It’s known to me. Kind of. I more or less understand the... anyway, what does that matter? It’s a perfectly innocent portal.”

“You weren’t trying to get some of the elemental messengers to go through it, then?”

“Maybe,” he said evasively. “What’s wrong with that?”

“The Adventure Society will be taking them into custody.”

“We caught them. It’s our cage. We’ve already got them in custody.”

“You aren’t isolated underground this time, Jason. You’re surrounded by adventurers. Powerful adventurers.”

“If you’re going to be making threats, Lady Allayeth, then I think you’d best start calling me Mr Asano.”

A gold-ranker approached in a blur of speed.

“You don’t talk to her like that,” the gold-ranker said.

“And you don’t bully our team like that,” Clive said, stepping up behind Jason along with the rest of their companions. “If these messengers belong to you, you’re welcome to them.”

Clive snapped his fingers and the cages vanished, leaving four dozen messengers amongst the adventurers. Jason’s group rushed through the portal arch, aside from Jason himself. He watched as Allayeth conjured a whip in each hand, each whip having nine thick lashes that ended in a serpentine head. They looked very much like a hydra whip that Jason had used at bronze rank.

Compared to Jason’s old whip, Allayeth’s conjured ones were vastly more powerful, as expected of a diamond-ranker. The heads dove down again and again as if bobbing for apples. With each bite, a silver-rank messenger died. The other adventurers contributed little more than containing the messengers as the whips did their grisly work, although some of the gold-rank adventurers contributed damage effectively.

After watching for a moment, Jason followed his companions through the portal. A gold-ranker moved to stop him but was brought up short by a spike of aura from Jason, who took the chance to slip into the portal. In his wake, the gold-ranker had the angry expression of a man who had just been startled by a moth and was angry at the embarrassment.

Jason appeared in his soul realm in one of the courtyards surrounding the central pagoda. In the constantly changing world of Jason’s astral kingdom, the courtyards currently had slate tile floors and were divided up by trellises covered in brightly flowering vines. The team were sitting at a large round table in plush cloud furniture

Jason joined them, tapping into the raw magic that he could shape into spirit coins as he did. Instead of turning the magic into coins, he had it take the form of trays full of refreshments and the team immediately started digging in.

“Bro, that was a total boss move,” Taika told Clive.

“It did feel satisfying,” Neil agreed, “but I can’t help but wonder about the repercussions.”

“I can’t say I approve of releasing all those messengers,” Humphrey said. “I know Lady Allayeth will handle them, but it still doesn’t feel right.”

“It felt right to me,” Clive said. “Jason isn’t the only one who doesn’t like getting pushed around. We devised those cages, we filled them with messengers and then they want to swoop in and what? Hand them all over to the Magic Society for study? No.”

“Am I the only one here that respects authority?” Humphrey complained.

His chair was a loveseat he shared with Sophie. She sidled next to him, taking his hand and intertwining their fingers.

“Of course you are,” she said sweetly. “I was a thief, Lindy was a thief. She still is, more often than she strictly should be. Taika is some kind of criminal, I’m not clear on the details. Clive is definitely done after the way he was treated by the Magic Society, and I certainly don’t have to explain Jason.”

“I don’t think you could,” Neil said.

“I don’t have a problem with authority,” Rufus said. “Hierarchy is important in the management of institutions.”

“I’m ambivalent,” Neil said. “I could go either way, based on the circumstances. Which we should all be able to agree is the smart approach.”

“Well, you’ve got Rufus,” Sophie said, squeezing Humphrey’s hand. “That’s something, at least.”

“We’ve provoked the local authorities again,” Rufus said. “That leaves the question of what to do next. Are we going to investigate this giant hole with elemental messengers geysering out?”

“Absolutely not,” Humphrey said. “Presumably these messengers have dug their way out. We have no real idea what’s down there; all our information comes from sources that are unreliable or explicitly antagonistic.”

“Agreed,” Clive said. “I don’t trust some half-cooked Magic Society assumptions based on a handful of sketchy aura readings.”

“Or the Voice of the Will,” Jason added.

“Anything we do here, we do with our eyes open,” Humphrey said. “Between Clive and Jason—”

“Mostly Jason,” Neil interjected.

“Between Clive and Jason,” Humphrey repeated, giving Neil a sharp look, “we’ve demonstrated that we aren’t going to be pushed around. That means we can’t go back to playing good, obedient adventurers—”

“Which we’re terrible at anyway,” Belinda said.

“Could people stop interrupting me? We can’t—”

“Yeah, stop interrupting Humphrey,” Jason said. “He’s trying to monologue through what we’re... oh I did it too, didn’t I? Sorry Hump.”

Humphrey didn’t resume talking right away, panning a disgruntled gaze over the table. He saw the rest of the group trying not to laugh and turned around. Behind his chair, His moustachioed twin was also panning his gaze over the group, but with comically exaggerated sternness.

“Yeah,” Stash said in a gravelly imitation of Humphrey’s voice. “I’m a very serious man who relies on my friends to provide my own familiar with biscuits.”

“Stash, we’ve talked about this,” Humphrey said. “Biscuits are a sometimes food.”

“I’m a dragon! I’m not going to get fat!”

“It’s not about getting fat. It’s about self-discipline.”

“You never let me do anything I want!” Stash yelled and ran off. Humphrey watched him go with a sigh.

“I think he’s heading into the dragon equivalent of being a teenager,” Humphrey explained. “The accelerated maturing of a bonded familiar means we got to this point early, but at least it shouldn’t last too long.”

“Are you sure?” Rufus asked.

“Being a bonded familiar accelerates the maturation cycle of long-lived bonded familiar beasts,” Humphrey said. “It’s why creatures like dragons allow their young to bond.”

“Yes, I know that part,” Rufus said. “But Stash will slowly develop as you go through silver-rank, right? Which should take you about as long as a human goes through the juvenile stage. What you’ve got there, Humphrey, is a normal teenage boy. Who can shape-shift.”

Humphrey leaned back in his chair, looking shell-shocked at Rufus’ revelation. Sophie comfortingly patted his hand.