

## Chapter 769

### Echoes of the Dead

While many of the adventurers excelled using familiars, summons and flight powers as platforms from which to battle the messengers, not all fared as well. The most vulnerable were those relying on external flight devices. Some were fine, usually those with the most elaborate and expensive devices. Former Hurricane Princess Zara rode a two-headed pegasus made of sapphires that not only provided transport but added to her combat power.

Zara specialised in wide-area ranged attacks, so having her construct mount cracking heads with its hooves biting with its twin heads was useful. It even shot sapphire feathers from its wings that punched through flesh and bone like a railgun, or struck bodies of stone and sent spiderweb cracks spreading through them.

Zara's exceptional flying construct was very much the exception, a precious item she had inherited from her Aunt Vesper. Even a princess from one of the most powerful nations on the planet was lucky to have it, meaning that most of the flight devices were not as impressive.

One of the more popular flying tools in Yaresh was a cloud that one person could fly around on. Those used by the expedition were based on metal and air, rather than water and air, functioning something like magical nanoswarms. The versions that relied on water magic were not brought along, under the assumption that they would fail quite quickly. The elemental energy of the local magic still seeped into them, but their metal makeup was compatible with that power.

At first, it went well, the local magic even supercharged the performance of the metal and air clouds. But as that power built up, it became more than the devices could handle. Overcharged with elemental energy, devices started failing in various ways. Most commonly they just dispersed themselves, dropping their passengers as the tiny fragments of metal scattered. Other clouds did the same but the fragments combusted, burning up in a shower of sparks. A handful behaved extremely oddly and collected together in a swarm that dove down into the enemy, attacking any messenger they passed over. This wasn't effective, since they were tiny bits of rounded metal that couldn't do much more than get in the messenger's eyes. It was far from worth all those clouds having dumped their riders.

The expedition reacted swiftly when an adventurer lost their ride. Miriam had anticipated this from the moment she ordered the crawlers left behind and had

preparations already in place. Falling adventurers were snagged up with a variety of powers, from swooping familiars to anyone who could bring others along on a teleport. Shade bodies appeared out of nowhere to turn into personal flight devices, although this was something of a last resort. Shade's vehicle forms were not built for the rigours of combat and a few rescues had false starts as a flying motorcycle or personal flight suit was destroyed by a messenger attack.

Miriam's drill formation proved effective but grew increasingly shaky as they descended through the messengers pressing endlessly on all sides. Each flight device that failed, each adventurer that had a flying summons destroyed out from under them was a fresh gap in the defences.

Casualties were healed up and sent back to the line but there was inexorable attrition. They had yet to suffer any deaths, but some injuries were too severe to heal quickly without essence abilities that required ritual magic to use. Neil had an essence ability, but he had neither the time nor the space to use it. Onslow's shell was normally a good space for such magic but it was crowded with adventurers and being rocked by continuous assaults. Onslow's defences were holding but it was not an environment conducive to careful and precise ritual casting. There was a reason that Clive's use of combat rituals was so unusual.

Despite the attrition, the expedition was proving the power of guild-level elite adventurers. Strategy, intelligence and preparation were paying off as they withstood an army that would have swarmed across the surface world like the wrath of a vengeful god. The messengers, while numerous and powerful, were also thoughtless, reckless unskilled, most having been freshly spawned.

The elemental messengers simply weren't the threat that regular messengers were. Aside from the gold-rankers being smart enough to stay away, they lacked any sign of coordination, strategy, tactics, or even self-preservation. Trained and experienced adventurers could not only do better but exploit those weaknesses to maximum effect. They also lacked the variety of powers that regular messengers possessed, let alone essence users.

Versatility was what made well-trained essence users the most powerful force at any given rank. As for the elemental messengers, a stream of fire versus a cone of fire, or a stone spear versus a metal one did not make for a complex mixture of attacks. It was so predictable that the expedition had brought a massive supply of potions and tools tailored to counter and resist exactly those attacks. It was this preparation, more than anything else, that had prevented any deaths in the face of so many enemies.

While the adventurers were showing their worth, the weight of numbers remained an inescapable fact. And while the expedition held almost every advantage, that didn't make the messengers weak. Elemental energy had supercharged their powers and the tools and potions of the adventurers wouldn't hold out forever. Mana pools dwindled and exhaustion crept in, even silver-rank stamina lasting only so long.

"We're lucky they still haven't committed their gold-rankers," Miriam said over the command channel.

"I can sense them," Amos responded. Miriam had looped him in as his superior senses made him the best early warning system they had.

"Are they showing signs of moving to attack?" Miriam asked.

"They are still working to contain Asano's butterflies," Amos reported. "With enemies so tightly packed, they are extremely hard to suppress."

"They are suppressing them, though?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps we should have included a traditional affliction specialist after all," Miriam said. "But even our most pessimistic projections never predicted numbers like these."

"Their gold-rankers are thinning out their own numbers for us," Amos pointed out. "Not enough to practically diminish the whole but there are areas where their numbers are less dense now. We should aim to pass through those areas they've already culled themselves."

"We don't want to go close enough to tempt the gold-rankers into an attack," Miriam said.

"They're following the spread of the butterflies," Amos said. "I can direct us towards an area they've moved on from."

"Then please do."

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Both the Builder cult and the expedition were battered and spent by the time they came face to face. The tension between them almost led to disaster as they paused, each ready for confrontation. The ceaseless torrent of messengers did not care for the tension of the would-be allies and continued their attacks unabated. The defensive lines of both groups threatened to collapse, pushing the two groups almost back to back.

The adventurers and the cultists both had cards left up their sleeves, their last resorts held back for emergencies. Long cooldown powers, potent abilities that exhausted most of what mana they had left. For a blazing moment, the messengers were the ones being

overwhelmed. It was enough pushback for the expedition and the cultists to reform their lines and achieve a reluctant but functional joint formation.

The final stretch down the shaft had the cultists and especially the expedition all but spent. It was the time for high-endurance combatants to shine, such as Jason and Sophie. Having fought through countless enemies, they had grown stronger instead of weaker. With boons stacked high, they rivalled some of the gold-rankers for raw power and took on core defensive roles in the formation.

Sophie was all but invisible, a streak of motion that appeared only to intercept an attack and hit back far harder than she normally could. She fended off attacks with her hands, feet, shins and forearms.

“Did I just see you block a fireball with a headbutt?” Jason asked.

“Shut up and fight!”

“Ooh, strict nanny.”

“Jason!”

“Sorry, Hump.”

Jason’s speed was also blinding, although his jerky, pinball movement was crude next to Sophie’s graceful flow. He also intercepted attacks, but instead of negating them, he just took the hits. A few were blocked by a pair of shields generated by orbs borrowed from Gordon, but many more impaled, lacerated, burned or even decapitated him. He burned through life force, only to draw even more from the enemies. Jason’s Feast of Blood power drained all enemies in a wide area, and the messengers were filling the space around them like bricks in a wall.

More than a few of the cultists were keeping an eye on Jason as he fought. Beaufort ignored them so long as their combat performance didn’t suffer, although even he was sometimes taken aback. When something bounced off him he reached out and grabbed it, discovering it was Jason’s severed head. He looked around to see Jason still fighting, his hood masking if he had a replacement head or was simply still fighting without it.

He watched Jason suck the life out of a whole raft of messengers. The vibrant red of their life force was draining into Jason in so many streams that it looked like a tide of blood. The messengers were left as withered husks and fell out of the air, more moving in to replace them immediately.

Beaufort tossed the head aside and went back to fighting.

Jason and Sophie weren’t alone in growing stronger rather than weaker over the course of the battle. For all that they approached gold-rank performance in certain metrics, neither held a candle to team Moon’s Edge’s berserker, Alice. She was just as buffed as

Jason and Sophie, but at a gold-rank baseline, rather than silver. She was less a combatant at that point than a living zone of annihilation at the front of the formation.

Arabelle Remore was also quite powerful, floating by herself, surrounded by massive jars. Alternately filled with red life force and blue mana, she seemed isolated and vulnerable, which was part of the trap. Any messengers who came close found their life force and mana yanked out of them and added to the jars.

Throughout the battle, Arabelle had been accumulating vast amounts of life force and mana. She spent them in massive quantities, showering the expedition with mass healing and the enemies in crippling medical maledictions. Their silver-rank, largely elemental bodies should have been immune to them, but Arabelle didn't care about affliction immunity any more than Jason did.

Like many adventurers, especially from Vitesse, Arabelle dabbled in different roles while maintaining her position as a healer. She was not an affliction specialist and only had a couple of grim powers as trump cards. Doing anything more with her afflictions would take someone else, and Jason was happy to oblige. He drained all the toxins and diseases Arabelle bestowed, leaving transcendent damage in their place.

Battling their way down the shaft, the uneasy allies formed a grudging acceptance of one another. That acceptance was heavily reliant on the leadership of both sides, each with their reasons to want the other dead. Every adventurer knew that the cultists were either invaders from another universe or, worse, traitors who had sided with them. They were all disciplined, but Miriam still gave a few stern reminders of the situation in which they found themselves. As for the cultists, Beaufort's iron control was the only reason many of them weren't shrieking their hatred and fear at Jason.

The shaft ended in an underground chamber that seemed impossibly vast. Only his ability to see through the dark allowed Jason to see across the kilometres of width and depth as the group descended through a vast hole in the roof. His amazement was undercut by a pervasive stench of death that seemed to infest even the magic around them.

The elemental aspects of the ambient magic around them had grown consistently stronger as the expedition made its way down from the surface. By the end, it had surrounded them oppressively, like sitting between two fat people on a domestic flight. But, on entering that vast chamber, all that was pushed aside. Like a river full of corpses flooding over an embankment, death washed over everything. Aura and magical senses alike were muted, quashed by a lifeless dread.

Most adventurers of silver and especially gold rank had seen horrors. The kind of threats that produced mass civilian casualties were the most important for adventurers to confront. Whole towns wiped out by plague zombies, vampires feeding on herds of livestock and sending them on a rampage as hideous ghouls. The lingering energy of death in this chamber dwarfed all of that.

Very few members of the group were unaffected, even the cultists that had seen it before. Jason and Farrah were the ones able to endure it the best after their experiences on Earth. The city of Makassar had seen hundreds of thousands die, then raised up using foul necromancy. They had spent days wading through the dead, returning the unliving mockeries to rest. The result of infighting between the factions of Earth, it was a critical point for Jason. His time on Earth had already made him harder, but that was the beginning of his descent into savagery and the edge of madness.

“Do not linger at the top of the shaft,” Beaufort warned driving the group down into the open space. “The messengers won’t follow into the heart of the chamber.”

True to his word, the messengers swept out of the shaft like a swarm of insects and turned off in the direction of the nearest wall. They streamed out of the shaft, like a waterfall that wouldn't end, but eventually, it did. As if the expedition no longer existed, they hurried off, Jason seeing them vanish into a massive hole torn into the wall of the chamber, which was otherwise covered in buildings carved into the rock. The massive hole was far from the only damage, but Jason didn't look further as Beaufort addressed the entire group.

“They will not tarry here,” Beaufort said, “and they are right not to. We must also move with haste, but avoid getting close to anything. We will move through the air, staying clear of the roof and the walls until we reach the far side. Most of all, stay high above the ground.”

Beaufort led them in the opposite direction from where the messengers went and towards the furthest end of the chamber. As they moved, Jason continued to examine their new surroundings. It was an abandoned city, with buildings rising from the floor, hanging from the ceiling and carved into the walls. Signs of destruction were everywhere, with wall buildings caved in, floor buildings collapsed and the roof buildings fallen to the ground below. Holes pockmarked every surface, each large enough to drive a small car through. The ground was covered in some kind of organic substance, lifeless and inert.

“This is the largest chamber of this underground realm,” Beaufort explained as he led the group on. “It was the home to the vast majority of the brightheart smoulders. Now there is nothing but the echoes of the dead. The messengers avoid this place, even withdrawing

the roots of their foul tree. Without their wariness of this chamber, we would not have lasted as long as we have.”

“I’d like to hear more about that tree,” Jason said. “I already suspected...”

He trailed off and turned to look behind them.

“Beware behind,” Amos said, beating him to the punch.

Soon the others sensed the spectral entities that had followed them, having emerged from the roof buildings closest to the shaft. Many had dived in amongst the messengers who scattered like panicked birds, a stark contrast to their previous implacable behaviour. Others came for the expedition and their reluctant cultist allies. Miriam swiftly deployed those with effective powers to intercept, Jason included. The entities were weak, mostly iron and bronze-rank, with a scant few silvers, and were dealt with swiftly enough. The expedition continued on.

“Most things in this chamber have little power,” Beaufort explained, “and lack a physical form. That is not always the case, however, and the danger of death, twisted to wretched purpose, is underestimated at your peril. I can promise you that.”

Beaufort continued to lead them on, staying well away from the buildings above and below. Jason occasionally spotted movement, seeing various shapes meandering about. Some looked like messengers, stumbling like zombies. Others were plodding, shapeless forms like sluggish earth elementals. All had auras stained by death.

Reaching the far side of the chamber, Beaufort led them towards a circular gate set midway up the wall. It was built into the wall, unlike the ragged hole the messengers had used. It was massive, large enough to pass an airship through, and blocked by an enormous stone roller. More normal-sized double doors were set into the middle of the roller, each constructed of metal and etched with protective sigils. The buildings around the gate had all been caved in, the destruction too thorough to have been anything but methodical.

“We make sure nothing gets too close to the gate,” Beaufort explained. “It’s an ongoing effort.”

“Why is the gate so high in the wall?” Miriam asked.

“This was for flying vehicles and festival parades, so I’m told,” Beaufort said. “The doors are new. The ground-level entrance to the next chamber is too much of a risk.”

A half dozen guards stood in alcoves to either side of the doors. The alcove on one side held cultists that looked normal but whose auras reeked of the Builder’s magic. On the other side were smoulders, but not like those Jason had seen before. They appeared normal for their kind, being stocky with dark skin marked by glowing runes. Like the

cultists, it was their auras that differentiated them from the ordinary. They each had strong magic, but not that of essence users. These people were imbued with elemental power, much like what the expedition had been sensing all the way down the shaft. In these people, though, it was less erratic, cleaner and more stable.

Beaufort moved out ahead, sharing a look with one of the smoulder guards.

“We wondered if you would return at all,” the guard said. “The enemy you spoke of is amongst these people?”

“He is,” Beaufort said.

“Then you had best deliver him.”

The red runes on the guard's skin glowed brighter for a moment and the carved sigils on the doors glowed at the same time. Both runes and sigils faded and the doors swung open.