

## Chapter 755

### Welcome Aboard

The messenger device was an ovoid crystal held suspended in a rectangular frame of metal. The frame was some kind of magical brass variant, based on the colour and the magic Jason sensed from it. The crystal was very dark blue and perfectly smooth. The entire device was about the size of a bathtub.

“We have managed to confirm that the central part of the device is some manner of crystal,” a Magic Society official said. Jason hadn’t bothered remembering his name.

“You can confirm that it’s a crystal,” Marcus echoed.

“With a high degree of confidence,” the official said, his two flunkies nodding confirmation.

“Can you confirm that it’s blue?” Marcus asked.

“Not at this time. Initial assessment seems to indicate that, but until we apply spectral—”

“That’s it?” Marcus asked at almost a roar.

“We are also relatively certain that the framework is one of magical brass variants.”

“You’ve had hours to go over this, and that’s all you have?”

“If you would let us take it back to our campus—”

“No,” Marcus cut him off. “Out.”

They were inside a large tent in Marshalling Yard One on the Adventure Society campus. The tent was empty aside from Jason, Marcus, the Magic Society officials and the device. Marcus waved the officials out, their reluctance turning to haste as they saw his expression.

“Well,” Marcus admitted, “your friend Standish wasn’t wrong about them finding nothing. I didn’t think they’d be stupid enough to send their most politically powerful researchers instead of their most competent ones. Where I come from, Magic Society officials know how to let their skilled researchers do the work and then exploit them after. What kind of idiots try to do it themselves?”

“You felt their auras,” Jason said. “There’s no way you missed that level of self-delusion.”

“Yeah,” Marcus grumbled. “I just needed to complain out loud. I detest incompetent people.”

“Then you really shouldn’t have talked Clive into leaving.”

Clive had an hour with the device before agreeing to let the Magic Society have a look. Marcus had convinced him to do so to ease political tensions, in return for placing Clive explicitly in charge of all magical investigation during the expedition. This had already been the case, but Marcus had now made sure that every member of the expedition understood the consequences of ignoring that directive.

“Standish only had an hour with the thing. Did he get any further than ‘it’s probably a crystal?’”

“I did,” Clive said as he entered the tent. “The device is very focused on astral magic, which is good for us. The only advanced magic from outside our world that I’ve had the chance to extensively study is astral magic, which also happens to be my specialty.”

“What do we have?” Jason asked.

“It’s complicated. Most of the device serves as what’s called a dimensional differentiator. You see, there are a lot more layers to reality than most people realise. Jason understands this better than almost anyone, having spent a lot of time in the most fundamental reality layer of his home planet. That was the bottom layer, the most foundational, where the Builder — or you, in this case, Jason — can mess with the underpinnings of existence. The top layer is the world we know and live in, while everything in-between is where the material of reality comes from. If you think of the bottom layer of reality as a kitchen, the middle layers are ingredients and the top layer is the cooked meal.”

“Is that analogy even close to accurate?” Marcus asked.

“No,” Clive said. “But unless you’ve got five spare years to study astral magic, it’s what you’re getting. The cooked meal comparison works well enough, though. You see, the natural array taps into those middle layers of reality. Trying to access them from the completed layer of reality, though — the completed meal — is like trying to extract an egg from a cake that’s already been baked.”

“Is that something you do?” Jason asked. “Is that why you suck so much when you cook anything but eels?”

“Let’s keep on topic, shall we?” Marcus said.

“Thank you,” Clive said gratefully, giving Jason a flat look. “You have to remember what it is we’re heading into underground. Whatever the messengers have turned it into, it started as a natural array; a sequence of manifested essences and alchemy stones that, through wild coincidence, formed a naturally occurring magical pattern. A pattern tapping into those middle layers of reality.”

“Are you saying this device is designed to isolate the dimensional layers associated with the aspects of the natural array?” Jason asked.

“Exactly,” Clive said. “We know that the essences and stones that comprise the array are exactly what you’d expect from deep underground. Earth, fire, metal, etc. It’s as much as we’ve managed to sense from the surface, but the elementally-infused messengers that came from underground would seem to confirm that. The natural array is tapping into the layers of reality related to that. Primal elemental dimensions. The device is designed to isolate those dimensions, thereby removing the elemental aspect of the natural array, leaving only the underlying magical matrix.”

“Wouldn’t that cause the matrix to collapse?” Jason asked.

“Yes,” Clive said, but—

“Can we get an explanation for someone who isn’t an astral magic specialist?” Marcus asked.

“This device is designed to extract the egg from the cake,” Jason said.

“That doesn’t help,” Marcus said. “I’m not really tracking the analogy anymore.”

“Then stand there, be quiet and look like a total bad-arse,” Jason told him. “You’re super-good at it.”

“Thank you?”

“You’re welcome,” Jason said. “Now, Clive. This thing isolates the elemental aspects of the natural array from its core magical framework, leaving behind a neutral matrix. I assume the second function of the device is to use that matrix for something.”

“Yes,” Clive said. “I just have no idea what. It’s past my level of understanding, and I mean way past. Give me a decade with the material from the messenger’s study and maybe.”

“That’s alright,” Jason said. “I think I might know what it’s making. What the messengers were trying to make in the first place, and why Vesta Carmis Zell has been willing to put up with all the losses and resource cost operating here has been.”

“You know what it’s making?” Marcus asked.

“It’s a guess, but a guess that fits,” Jason said. “There’s a thing called a soul forge. I don’t know what it is exactly. If it’s an actual, physical thing or a loose magic matrix or something else. But every astral king has a soul forge. Every astral king but one.”

“This Vesta Carmis Zell doesn’t?” Marcus asked.

“No, she does,” Jason said. “I’m the one who doesn’t. Which is why she is definitely going to try and have me killed before I can claim it for myself. Letting me get involved at all is a gamble, but she’s been hamstrung by her own propaganda. If the messengers

handed this device off to anyone but one of their own, she'd have a religious uprising on her hands and need to kill off her own army. I'm barely close enough to count as one of their own, being an astral king."

"What are you basing this conclusion on?" Marcus asked.

"For one, the messenger commander I've captured. He suggested it as a possibility, as Vesta Carmis Zell is a practitioner of soul engineering. It's a crafting profession that is as ethically fraught as you'd imagine from the name. Having an extra soul forge would apparently be massively beneficial, although he wasn't certain as to how."

"Can you trust a messenger as a source?" Marcus asked.

"To a degree," Jason said. "He was far from certain, in any case. The other thing tipping me off was a gift I received from the Healer. It's an item that I'll only be able to use once I have a soul forge."

"That is a more reliable indicator," Marcus agreed. "Gods love to give hints instead of just telling you things outright. Except Knowledge. I'd take her as my patron deity if my entire life wasn't built around violently destroying people and things."

"Regretting your life choices?" Jason asked him.

"Absolutely not," Marcus said. "Violence is the best."

Jason and Clive shared a glance.

"Next question," Jason said, "is what happens when the device goes off. In theory, it isolated the elemental aspects of the array and creates a soul forge. Will that stabilise the magic down there, prevent it from reaching critical mass and blowing up Yaresh?"

"That, I can't tell you," Clive said. "I'm not an array specialist, let alone a natural array specialist. And once ours arrives, she won't be able to figure anything out until we get down there for her to look at it."

"You do have one, then," Marcus said. "I looked for one and the Magic Society said there's no such thing. That natural arrays are too rare to be a specialty field of study. Then I went to the Church of Knowledge. They told me to leave that to you, Asano, and I trusted in that. I'm glad to have it confirmed."

"We know someone," Jason said. "When I mentioned this whole thing, though, she told me to let the city blow up and she had her own stuff to deal with. She's done a lot for me over the last few years, so I didn't push. Clive is the one that got her on board."

"How do you even have a natural array specialist?" Marcus asked. "Without the Magic Society knowing, no less."

"She spent several years studying a planet-wide array that operated on the principles behind natural arrays," Jason explained.

“The adventurer you resurrected on your home planet,” Marcus realised.

“The Reaper resurrected her, not me. The World-Phoenix convinced him because she was worried I’d go nuts and let the whole planet die instead of saving it. Which was a good call, as it turned out. How did you get her to sign on, Clive?”

“Wait,” Marcus said. “Can we go back to the part about the great astral beings—”

“Nope,” Jason said. “Clive, what convinced her to sign up?”

“I asked her to.”

“That would do it, yeah,” Jason said.

“That’s it?” Marcus asked. “You just asked?”

“Do they not have friends where you come from, Mr Xenoria?” Clive asked.

“You think it’s strange that I don’t have a friend who is a specialist in something no one is a specialist of, and is willing to drop everything and follow me into the bowels of the planet to an unknown and extremely dangerous situation? Just because I asked?”

“Yes,” Jason and Clive said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“Wow,” Marcus said. “I may need to get better friends.”

“I’m sure yours are fine.”

“I have a friend who won’t let me forget about the time I took his slice of pie. That was three years ago.”

“At least your friends didn’t all sleep with your imaginary wife,” Clive grumbled.

“What?” Marcus asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” Clive said, looking defeated.

“Uh, alright,” Marcus said. “Make any final preparations tonight. At first light, we’ll do the final briefing and go. Make sure that friend of yours is here.”

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Farrah was portalled in by a Rimaros gold-ranker arranged by the Adventure Society. The society was under instruction from Marcus to accept any reasonable request from Jason and most of the unreasonable ones no questions asked. She arrived at the Adventure Society campus portal square, the portal closing immediately behind her. One of Jason’s portals opened up next to her immediately after and she stepped through, arriving outside the city in front of Emir’s cloud palace.

Most of the adventurer’s not native to Yareh were set up outside the city, and many of the native ones as well. They had their own portal square in front of the cloud palace that was the centrepiece of the adventurer camp, and Jason, Rufus and Gary were all waiting. Night had fallen hours ago and lanterns staved off the dark.

"I thought you already agreed to go on this expedition," Gary told her. Her response was inaudibly muffled through his fur as he pulled her into a devouring hug.

"It was up in the air," Farrah repeated after being released. "Are you going?"

"Gods, no," Gary said. "You may have only semi-retired, but I've committed. I'll get back to fighting monsters in the next monster surge."

"You're not going?" Jason asked him.

"No thank you," Gary said firmly. "I'm going to stick to my smithing."

"And where is your forge?" Jason asked

"Uh, you know that, obviously," Gary said. "It's in..."

Jason grinned as realisation struck.

"...your soul space," Gary finished limply.

"Welcome aboard," Farrah said, reaching up to slap him on the shoulder.

Gary hung his head back and sighed. Then he perked up and started laughing as he pointed at the sky. Everyone's gaze followed his finger and spotted a bright red light in the sky. An airship that looked like a water vessel except flying and on fire was moving through the sky, leaving a sparkling trail behind like a comet. Rufus groaned and slapped an exasperated hand to his forehead.

"You're burning through spirit coins you idiot," he muttered.

"You know who that is?" Jason asked.

"Yes," Rufus grumbled. "Please let mother know that my father is about to arrive."

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Gabriel Remore plunged out of the sky, trailing fire the same way his airship had. Jason stood off to the side as he reunited with his wife and son, laughing quietly as Rufus acted like a surly teenager. Gabriel exchanged greetings with Gary and Farrah, his son's old team, before wandering over to speak with Jason.

Gabriel looked a lot like Rufus, tall, dark and muscular, but with hair. He wore it in colourful beads, but instead of tight to the head like Emir wore them, his trailed down to his shoulders in chains.

"I like your hair," Jason said as they shook hands.

"I like your ludicrous power and ability to come back from the dead. Do you have any idea how crazy the stories about you are?"

"Honestly? The reality is probably more absurd than what you've heard."

"I can't wait to hear all about it on this expedition."

"You're coming along?"

"I asked Marcus to keep it a secret so I could surprise Roo."

“Dad,” Rufus called over. “I told you if you call me that, I’m going to tell mother about the cooler box under the deck at—.”

“That’s fine!” Gabriel hurriedly choked out. “Understood, son. Not a problem.”

He leaned closer to Jason to whisper conspiratorially.

“He can be so ruthless. Doesn’t care about his old dad at all—”

“Silver-rank now,” Rufus called over. “My hearing is very, very good.”

Gabriel grumbled under his breath as he placed a hand on Jason’s shoulder.

“Never have kids,” he told Jason.

“What was that?” Arabelle asked in the tone of a gun being cocked.

“Nothing, dear. Love you.”

## Chapter 756

### Quick and Clean

Yaresh was no longer lit up at night. The tree buildings were toppled, lanterns no longer draped from the branches. The metal and glass ziggurats no longer shined in the city centre, having been annihilated in the fight between the garuda and the naga genesis egg.

Only a handful of patches in the city still shone in the dark. The most prominent was the Adventure Society campus, left largely intact despite being the starting point of the garuda fight. Some less important outbuildings where the fight had broken out were nothing but rubble, but the defences on the core areas had kept them intact as the fight spilled through the shining buildings at the city's heart.

The Magic Society campus and Ducal Palace boasted similarly effective protection and were all but untouched. The only other places that came close were the underground bunkers. Many of them were still being used to house the displaced populace, along with the tent cities dotted through the city ruins. The lamps lighting up these sad encampments were nothing compared to the shining city of the past and made up most of the city's nighttime illumination.

With the vast reduction in light pollution, the stars were more visible in the night sky. It was poor consolation but Jason still took advantage. He was reclined in a cloud chair, floating high above the city after leaving the Remore family to their reunion. Gabriel's arrival also reunited his old team with Arabelle, Emir and Callum Morse.

Jason had been studiously avoiding Callum and his continual petitions to see Melody. Arabelle claimed that Callum was improving now that everything was in the open and she could work with him, but the man's aura still felt dangerously unstable to Jason. Perhaps his old team would help balance him out; it certainly worked for Jason.

"Mr Asano," Shade said.

Jason sighed.

"You know, Shade, we're going underground in the morning. I can't help but wonder how long it will be until I see the sky again. There's a lot going on down there, and what little information we have is months out of date."

"It could only be a few days," Shade pointed out. "Get down there, trigger the device and leave."

"Do you really think it's going to be that simple?"



“Of course not, Mr Asano. But a positive outlook is more likely to achieve positive results. The anticipation of negative results can be a self-fulfilling prophecy, something I believe you understand.”

“I suppose I do.”

“Even if the messengers get what they want, that is hardly the end of the world. A phrase that is not hyperbole when addressing your activities, so be thankful for that. If the astral king gets her soul forge and this region avoids explosive destruction, that is at least an acceptable outcome. The astral king will take her prize and leave, allowing the city reconstruction to begin in earnest.”

“I don’t think the messengers see it the same way. I’m guessing the idea of me taking the soul forge for myself is a risk they are very much cognisant of, assuming that we’re right and that’s what they’re trying to make. They’ll be after my head, whatever the outcome. And what if I do get the soul forge? What happens when I become an astral king proper? Do I suddenly jump to transcendent-rank? Am I stuck out in the astral with a letterbox on my head?”

“Since when are you afraid of vast cosmic power, Mr Asano?”

“Power reveals who you are. On Earth, my relative power was enormous and I don’t like what that did to me. Am I better now? I feel like I am, but what if I’m wrong and I become too powerful for my friends to correct me?”

“Do you believe that you will be so out of touch that they need to?”

“There’s a chance. Even if it’s an outside one, doesn’t the damage if it happens make the risk worth considering?”

“I am not sure you should take your moral imperatives from terrible films about superheroes fighting each other, Mr Asano.”

“You’ve seen that movie?”

“You had me assign one of my bodies to Mr Williams’ shadow.”

“Right, Taika actually likes that movie. At least I know one person with worse judgement than me.”

“Mr Asano, if you’re waiting until you become a perfect man, you’ll be waiting forever. Literally; you’re ageless and it will never happen.”

Jason laughed.

“Thank you, Shade. Once again, your perspective offers sage guidance.”

“You are welcome, Mr Asano.”

“So, what’s up?”

“Lady Allayeth would like to see you.”

“No worries. Say, did you notice that Jali and Allayeth have the exact same hair colour?”

“I don’t pay attention to most colours. They seem pointless.”

“That explains a lot. Does she want to see me about that guy who tried to kill me?”

“Yes. She is awaiting you outside the interrogation room.”

“I can sense it. Any idea why Humphrey is there?”

“Lady Allayeth requested his presence to identify the man.”

“Interesting. Thank you, Shade.”

The chair under Jason dispersed, the cloud material being drawn into the tiny flask hanging from his necklace. He let himself fall, still laying back with legs crossed at the ankles and hands behind his head. Eventually, he shifted his weight to let his legs drift up, pointing him at the rapidly approaching ground. His cloak manifested around him and then flumed out, spreading like wings to turn his plummet into a breakneck swoop over the city.

Racing into the Adventure Society campus, he careened between some of the few buildings left standing in the city. Finally, he plunged into one of the many nighttime shadows, vanishing as if it were a hole in the wall. Inside a nearby building, Shade emerged from Humphrey’s shadow and Jason emerged from Shade.

“What’s going on?” Jason asked.

“They’ve gotten the man who attacked you to talk,” Humphrey said. “They brought me in to confirm his identity.”

“You know the guy? I didn’t recognise him.”

“You wouldn’t, although you have met,” Humphrey said. “You only saw him very briefly back when you were still iron rank. Your aura perception was weak enough that you wouldn’t have sensed his aura to recognise. Not from a silver-rank stealth specialist.”

“The man who attacked me was gold.”

“You’re not the only one who gets to rank up, Jason.”

“Now you’ve got me curious. Who is he?”

“A former member of the Greenstone nobility, which is how I recognised him. Lawrence Sparnow, also known as Mr Sparrow in certain unsavoury circles. He vanished from the city after kidnapping you for Cole Silva and hasn’t been heard from since.”

“He’s the one that grabbed me and handed me over for star seed implantation.”

“And was paid quite well for his services, it would seem. Using that money as a seed, he built a lucrative criminal enterprise. With the supply of monster cores being so high during the extended surge, he managed to accrue enough cores to hit gold-rank.”

“What is he doing here?”

"Some of that we can only guess," Allayeth said, coming through a door to join them in the hall. "The people that hired him were extremely careful about not exposing themselves. As best we can ascertain, the aristocratic faction who aren't happy about how things are going politically were looking to tip over the fruit cart. They wanted to kill you, Jason, to try and change things up by getting the expedition cancelled. Force the city population to be evacuated and founded again elsewhere."

"So, pretty much what I predicted would happen."

She rolled her eyes.

"Yes, Jason. I remember our bet."

"Would killing Jason even stop the expedition at this stage?" Humphrey asked. "We have the device, and the hole the elemental messengers dug to the surface. We don't need the underground tunnel the regular messengers have been sitting on."

"Perhaps, perhaps not," Allayeth said. "The messengers were about to hand off the device when Jason was attacked, but they hadn't done it yet. They might have snatched it back if Jason died. Also, I don't imagine you and your team would still be willing to participate in the expedition if he did. At this point, Clive Standish and Farrah Hurin are more important to the expedition's success than you are, Jason."

"They're willing to let the city be destroyed?" Humphrey asked.

"The aristocrats are on the back foot right now," Allayeth said. "The arrival of Marcus Xenoria and the unexpected support he has gotten from key figures in the aristocrats like Gormanston Bynes has left their power scattered. But the aristocrats still represent a majority of resources and power in Yaresh. Needing to rebuild would recentre their importance and let them re-establish their influence, building it into the very foundations of the new city."

"Can you use this against the aristocratic faction?" Humphrey asked. "We don't want any more interference in an expedition that already has too many uncertainties."

"I doubt it," Jason said. "I'm guessing they used this guy precisely because he was outside of their power structure. They'll have used enough cut-outs and blind meetings that there'll be no linking them to it."

"That's exactly what happened," Allayeth confirmed. "We'll try and make the connection, but for all they're mediocre at adventuring, the aristocratic faction excels at scheming. That's why it takes unpredictable outliers like Jason and Marcus Xenoria to force them out of their old patterns and slip up."

“My question,” Jason said, “is what was the guy doing here in Yaresh that they could find him to hire? And why would he take the job? Surely he wouldn’t have missed how much attention is on me right now. I’d have thought he’d be anywhere but here.”

“He was already here to kill you before the aristocrats found him,” Allayeth said. “He heard that while you were in the Storm Kingdom, you caught up with the man who hired him to kidnap you.”

“We did,” Jason said.

“He worried about you coming for him next.”

“I had no idea where he was.”

“He imagined the man you caught believed the same thing. I’m not sure you understand the magnitude of the stories around you, Jason, and the impact they have on people that hear enough of them.”

“I understand fine. Every prick that hears them either dismisses them as lies or tries to crack me open and shake the secrets out. Kidnapping me, breaking into my cloud house, seducing me.”

“Seducing you?” Humphrey asked. “Who did that?”

“No one yet, but a bloke can dream. Wait, did anyone try it? Am I just forgetting? Surely someone’s tried it by now. Did I not notice? Should I be paying more attention to this stuff?”

Allayeth looked nonplussed as Humphrey shook his head.

“Shade,” Jason said. “Has anyone ever tried to seduce me for my secrets?”

“Numerous times, Mr Asano,” Shade said. “They normally leave confused before you realise.”

“Wait, are you saying that I’m so repellent to women that they run off before I even notice?”

“I wouldn’t concern yourself, Mr Asano. They weren’t your type.”

“Really? I love confident, assertive women. You’d think that’s exactly what you’d want in a seductress. I know I do.”

“Jason,” Humphrey said. “I think you’ll find that perhaps your type had shifted somewhat.”

“Shifted where?” Jason asked.

“Upward,” Humphrey told him.

“Flying women? I hope you’re not talking about messengers because while they do have more startlingly attractive people who look twenty-five than a teen drama, they are off the table on principle.”

“No, Jason,” Humphrey said. “I’m saying that it’s all princesses and diamond-rankers for you these days.”

“It’s not my fault they’re the only ones around. I have to flirt with someone. I’m a magical being, Humphrey; I live on raw magic and repartee, and the astral only supplies me with one of those.”

“Jason, you do not live on banter.”

“I might. You don’t know how astral kings work.”

“Can I please say something?” Allayeth interjected.

“Of course,” Jason said.

“Always, Lady Allayeth,” Humphrey said. “We always have time for diamond-rankers, don’t we, Jason?”

Jason gave him a flat look.

“For your information, Humpy, the last two women I was intimate with were a bartender and a tavern owner.”

“And did either of them know your real name?” Humphrey asked.

“I wasn’t looking to get married. My type is quite inclusive when you—”

“Gentlemen,” Allayeth interrupted again. She was not used to being overlooked by silver-rankers and was finding the entire experience bizarre.

“Sorry,” Jason said.

“Apologies, Lady Allayeth,” Humphrey said

“Jason,” she said. “Explain to me how you can be out here having such a frivolous conversation when the man who handed you over for star-seed implantation is in the next room? He’s responsible for what must vie for the worst experience of your life.”

“He’s not responsible for anything,” Jason said. “The hammer pushes in the nail, but it’s the man holding it who builds the house. That guy means nothing to me.”

“Are you sure?” Allayeth asked. “I’m not certain I could be so detached about someone who delivered me to such a fate.”

“People try to kidnap or assassinate me a lot. If I took it all personally, I’d spend my life hunting down people for bloody reprisals, and that’s no way to live. I’m more interested in how he ended up here, coming after me.”

“I told you that stories around you can be rather extreme,” Allayeth said. “According to him, the fact that you escaped the Builder’s star seed that he delivered you to had always worried him. He feared what someone capable of that would do if you ever caught up with him. Then he heard you died and that anxiety went away. He concentrated on building a

criminal empire, to some success, and achieved gold-rank during the monster surge when the surplus of cores drove prices down.”

“They still can’t have been cheap,” Humphrey said. “Not for enough monster cores to hit gold.”

“But there was unprecedented availability, even if the price was still out of reach for most,” Allayeth said. “Sparnow has been very successful running a criminal enterprise so disgusting I don’t want to say what he was doing out loud.”

“That’s not new,” Humphrey said. “His predilections came to light during the trial of the men who had Jason kidnapped. Part of his payment was facilitating his appetites.”

“After the Builder decamped, the story about Jason’s involvement spread. It gets less well-known the further you get from Rimaros, but certain people always hear things. Sparnow had become powerful enough that he was such a person, and he realised that Jason had returned from the dead.”

“He must have loved hearing that,” Jason said.

“Sparnow immediately decided to make Jason dead again,” Allayeth continued. “He knew that if he didn’t kill you before you ranked up again, Jason, it wasn’t going to happen. He headed for Rimaros, where he heard about the other man. The one who hired him to kidnap you in the first place.”

“Killian Laurent,” Jason said. “He didn’t do so bad out of getting caught. I imagine he’s in a Magic Society basement somewhere, parcelling out enough nuggets to keep himself alive until he can execute an escape.”

“Sparnow doesn’t have the value this man Laurent had, and he knows it,” Allayeth said. “He has nothing to offer in return for staying alive other than the names of others who share his debased leanings. For him, capture meant death and he knew it.”

“So he came looking for the one person he thought would be motivated to hunt him down,” Humphrey said. “Only to effectively hunt himself down.”

“Travel was hard during the surge,” Allayeth said. “By the time travel routes opened up and he arrived in Rimaros, your team had moved on. The secret identity thing threw him off for a while, but when messenger servants started asking questions in Rimaros, he traced you here. He arrived in Yaresh shortly before the attack on the city and he’s been looking for a chance to kill you ever since.”

“But Jason has been roaming around the wilderness or spending time with gold and diamond-rankers,” Humphrey said.

“Exactly,” Allayeth said. “Meeting the messenger envoy alone presented a small but predictable time window. It was a risk, but Sparnow is a stealth specialist. His power set is

assassination-based, so he planned to get in, take Jason down and then escape before anyone responded.”

“I told you that the aristocratic faction caved on letting me go alone too quickly,” Jason told her.

“I already told you that I remember the bet, Jason.”

“What next?” Humphrey asked. “Can we use Sparrow to bait the aristocratic faction into making a mistake and exposing themselves? Trying to get what’s left of the city destroyed is outright treason.”

“We don’t have time to instigate the kind of investigation it would take to catch the aristocrats’ tail,” Allayeth said. “It is happening, but it’s unlikely to dig out proof and doesn’t help us now anyway. As soon as the expedition is away, we’re going to hold a trial for Sparrow to see if we can spook the aristocratic faction into making a mistake. It’s unlikely, but worth trying. Then Sparrow will be executed, unless the mercy you’ve been pursuing extends to this man, Jason? As the victim, your voice will make an impact on the sentencing. And if you’re willing to forgive messengers and the people who betrayed us to them...”

“He’s not part of an indoctrinated slave race or a prisoner broken by fear,” Jason said. “He’s a depraved predator.”

“Do you want to be the one to do it?” Allayeth asked. “We don’t anticipate getting much out of a trial, so if I let you in there right now, no one will say a word.”

“No,” Jason said. “I have no interest in vengeance and I’m not going to take joy in someone’s suffering, even someone like him. Using my powers on a gold-ranker is a slow and ugly way to kill.”

“He deserves slow and ugly, from what I’ve heard,” Allayeth said.

“It’s not about what he deserves, or what I want. The only reason to kill him is that the only thing he has to offer the world is poison. Keeping him alive would be doing harm. Once you have everything he knows about every other predator he knows, put him down. Quick and clean.”

Allayeth nodded.

“I’ll get it done,” she said and went back through the door.

Jason sighed and leaned against the wall.

“I hate making a choice like that,” he said. “I know I’m a hypocrite, with all the people I’ve killed, but when killing is the best option, it feels like I’ve failed to find a better way.”

Humphrey leaned against the wall next to Jason and nudged his shoulder.

“Don’t apologise for moral growth, Jason,”

“Are you sure it’s growth? It feels so murky. Am I doing the right thing with the messengers?”

“I don’t know,” Humphrey admitted. “I never used to get confused about right and wrong before I met you. Now I just do my best. Sometimes I’ll get it right and sometimes I won’t, and then I’ll do my best to fix that.”

“When did you get so smart?”

“Meaning that you thought I wasn’t?”

“Uh...”

Humphrey chuckled and looked over at the closed door.

“What was that bet Lady Allayeth kept mentioning?”

“After the aristocrats didn’t fight me on picking up the device alone, I bet her that they would try to have me killed.”

“What did you get for winning?”

“Nothing important. It doesn’t matter.”

Humphrey looked at Jason from under raised eyebrows.

“Fine,” Jason grumbled. “She has to buy me dinner.”

Humphrey shook his head.

“And if she won?” he asked.

“I had to buy her dinner.”

“That sounds like you set up a bet where you win either way.”

Jason grinned, pushed himself off the wall and slapped Humphrey on the shoulder.

“And your mum thought you’d never get your head around politics. I’m going to go wait for Farrah to turn up. She should be getting portalled in any minute.”

Humphrey watched Jason drop into his shadow like it was a hole in the floor and vanish. He then looked again at the door through which Allayeth had left.

“Maybe Rick has a point.”



## Chapter 757

### What We're Walking Into

The expedition members, along with Allayeth and Marcus, were in a briefing room aboard an airship owned by the Adventure Society. This included Jason's team, Rick's team and Korinne Pescos' team as the silver-rank combat contingent, along with a team from the Magic Society. The team of researchers had been, to everyone's surprise, swiftly approved by Clive. It turned out the society officials didn't want to go on the incredibly dangerous mission, so they sent the competent researchers they kept in the basement doing work they could claim credit for.

The gold-rankers included team Moon's Edge, an all-female team trained by Allayeth. Rufus' parents, Gabriel and Arabelle, had reformed their old team with Emir, minus former teammate Callum Morse. As they didn't trust Callum's current mentality for this mission, he had been swapped out for Emir's wife Constance. She had known them all for years and had trained with Callum leading up to gold-rank, so she at least had some familiarity with the group.

The remaining gold-rank participants were Amos Pensinata and Carlos Quilido. Amos joined because his nephew was on one of the silver-rank teams while Carlos was the closest they had to an expert on the elemental messengers.

There was no bronze or diamond-rank element to the expedition. Bronze-rankers were too weak and diamond-rank too strong for the massive fluctuations in the ambient magic. Sometimes it grew so saturated that it created anomalies that could kill a bronze-ranker outright. Other times it dropped to almost nothing, like on Earth when Jason first returned home. Gold-rankers without a ready supply of gold spirit coins would be swiftly debilitated, rendered comatose, or even die.

A diamond-ranker would have it worse. Even if a sufficient supply of diamond spirit coins could be mustered up, which they couldn't, it was uncertain if they would even be enough. Allayeth argued that she could duck into Jason's soul space if necessary, but had eventually been convinced otherwise. If dimensional forces somehow blocked Jason's soul portal at a point of absolute low magic, she could be crippled and killed as the magic-parched world sucked the life right out of her.

The briefing began with making sure that all the expedition members weren't missing any critical details. The basics had already been disseminated, but it was easy to miss something or other.

“To summarise,” Marcus said, standing at the front. “You’ll be entering through the hole we have secured, determining if the device does what the messengers claim, and then activating it if it does. The key threat is the unstable elemental magic pervading the underground area. This is the same magic slowly building up that will eventually destroy this region if we don’t stop it. Mr Standish, if you would?”

Clive got up and moved to the front, Marcus shifting aside.

“Let me reiterate,” Marcus said, “that Mr Standish is in command of all magical investigation in this expedition. I don’t care if you’re gold-rank, I don’t care if you’re Magic Society; when it comes to investigating the magic, his word is first and last.”

“Thank you, Representative Xenoria,” Clive said. “The nature of the magic we will encounter remains unknown in the specific, but we do know some of its general trends. It is elemental in nature and appears to have a transformative effect on the body and mind. Our best information is that being an essence user offers considerable but not total protection. Strength of will also seems to play a considerable part. The messengers attempted to send some of their servants, but the messengers kill anyone whose will they don’t break and those people did not do well.”

“How reliable is this information?” Constance asked.

“Not as much as we’d like,” Clive said. “A lot more comes from the messengers than what we could detect from the surface. Fortunately, within the last day, we’ve had access to a somewhat more reliable source. Jason?”

Jason got up and joined Clive.

“I know there have been a lot of questions about the messengers I’ve taken prisoner personally. What I’ve been doing with them and why. What information have I gotten from them? Some of that I’ve passed on already, mostly big-picture stuff with nothing specifically actionable. The initial group of messengers I captured weren’t part of the messenger’s original underground foray where they caused this problem in the first place. I couldn’t use them to confirm or deny the information Jes Fin Kaal has been giving the Adventure Society. The messenger I captured most recently is another story. She’s lower rank, but she was there in person.”

“How can we trust any of the information they gave you?” asked the leader of team Moon’s Edge, Miriam Vance.

“That’s a fair question,” Jason said. “I’ve taken the messengers away and you have no idea where I put them or what I’m doing with them. But there are people in this room that have. Lady Allayeth has seen them. I had her speak with them just today so that someone you trust could allay your fears as much as possible.”

“Anyone is free to speak with Lady Allayeth after the briefing,” Marcus said. “In the meantime, Mr Asano, please continue.”

“The latest messenger I captured was sent to us, in part, because she had little value to them. There are a lot of reasons for that I don't need to go into, but suffice it to say she was as close as the messengers get to a low-level drudge. She was part of an expendable group the messengers use for tasks like watching over the world-taker worm nests where there's a good chance of being killed by adventurers.”

“I thought they were all meant to be superior beings,” Gabriel said.

“They're indoctrinated to believe that they're superior to us, but ultimately that's just a method of control. They're slaves and are used as such by the astral kings. They have an internal hierarchy, where the lowest messengers are told they're still above everyone else.”

“You make them sound like victims,” Miriam said.

“They are,” Jason said. “Incredibly dangerous victims. Put them down if you get the chance; do not attempt to take them alive on the basis of compassion. Now, to get us back on track, these expendable messengers made up most of the group sent underground in the messengers' initial attempt to suborn the natural array. Only a fraction of them escaped when things went wrong.”

“And this messenger was one of them?” Miriam asked.

“Yes. She has first-hand accounts of what's down there.”

“We have detailed information that will be handed out with your packets at the end of this meeting,” Marcus said. “For now, a quick summary please, Mr Asano.”

“There is an underground city,” Jason said. “A magical variant of smoulders have been living peacefully with the natural array for an unknown period. During the monster surge, one of the earliest-arriving group of messengers somehow found this city and burrowed down to it, looking to claim the array. To complicate things, a group of Builder cultists followed them, looking to claim an astral space also located down there.”

“Is the astral space related to the natural array?” Emir asked.

“We don't know,” Clive told him. “This whole operation is built on incomplete and unreliable information, and I think we all know how that usually plays out.”

“Mr Standish,” Allayeth said. “Are you attempting to convince the members of this expedition to pull out?”

“No,” Clive said. “But if just explaining the situation makes it sound like I am, that should tell us all something.”

“The decision has been made, Mr Standish,” Marcus said. “I won’t force anyone down that hole, but you have had ample chance to back out.”

Clive looked at Jason who shrugged. Clive sighed before continuing.

“Each of you will be provided with elemental resistance items, which we believe will help stave off the corrupting effects of the magic down there. You’ll also receive potions designed to purge your bodies of the elemental affinities magic they’ll absorb in the process of natural mana recovery.”

“How confident are we that will work?” Arabelle asked.

“Jason?” Clive said.

“Obviously,” Jason said, “we can’t trust Jes Fin Kaal and her messengers. While she has, so far as we can tell, mostly played things straight, she has also kept things from us. According to the messenger I just captured, certain messengers were significantly more resistant to the influence of the natural array’s elemental energy. Those messengers were the ones who themselves possess elemental powers of the affiliated types, mostly fire, earth and metal.”

“If the messengers have people that can go down there,” Gabriel asked, “what do they need us for? As it was explained to me, they want us to go down there because they can’t.”

“They don’t have the numbers,” Jason said. “Elemental powers are fairly rare amongst messengers. Their local forces have between ten and twenty messengers that fit the bill, none of which are gold-rank. They don’t have the power to go down there and face what’s waiting for them.”

“Which is what?” Miriam asked. “Since it’s waiting for us as well, what are we dealing with?”

Clive stepped back as Jason took centre stage at the front of the briefing room.

“The best information we have,” Jason said, “is that we’re walking into a three-sided war already in motion. There’s an underground city down there and the native smoulders were, as of several months ago, largely unaffected by the unstable natural array. They’ve been modified by the array’s power for centuries. They may be immune to the power building up or just resistant, changing slower than the messengers. For all we know, it could be making them stronger and they’ll resist us trying to shut the array down. Hopefully not, as they’re our best bet for any kind of alliance down there.”

“Assuming that the escalating elemental energy hasn’t turned them into mindless monsters, the way it did the messengers,” Clive added.

“Yes,” Jason agreed. “Which brings us to the second faction, the element-infused messengers. We don’t know how many of them are still down there, but their numbers should be limited. A lot of them dug their way up and were killed on the surface. Fortunately, almost all should be silver-rank.”

He took a slow, weary breath.

“The third faction is the Builder cult. A lot of cultists couldn’t get back to the fortress cities before they dimension-shifted out, and we can safely assume that this lot were left behind. They were trapped with a lot of resources and significantly greater numbers than the messengers, and they holed up in the astral space, sealing it off. Hopefully, they’ll stay there and we won’t see them, but I don’t think we’ll be that lucky.”

“We also don’t know if the astral space has shielded them from the natural array’s magic,” Clive said.

“That’s right,” Jason agreed. “They may be bunkered down and unaffected, or they might be an army of elemental monsters by now.”

“So, to sum up,” Farrah said. “We’re going underground into a situation we don’t understand, filled with unstable magic we don’t understand, so we can fight enemies we don’t understand in order to do something we don’t understand but will probably give our worst enemies exactly what they want. We possibly understand what that is, but it’s a guess. Also, to pre-empt questions, I am trying to get everyone to not do this. I’ve got my own stuff going on, and if my friends weren’t going on this extremely ill-advised mission, I could get back to that.”

Marcus hung his head, letting out a groan that sounded like a passenger jet spinning up its engines.

“I’m going to stop things here before someone actually convinces you all to pull out,” he said. “We expect to arrive at the tunnel in around an hour, so I want you all to take that time and review the supplemental material you’ll be given as you leave this room. Please direct any questions to myself or Lady Allayeth.”

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Marcus looked over the side of the airship at the fortress town below. Built over the top of the hole blasted out by the elemental messengers, it was a spiderweb of reinforced bridges with buildings on them, with a ring of larger buildings around the perimeter.

“This was built in a few weeks?” he growled. “People in Yaresh are living in tents and bunkers while this many construction resources were diverted here?”

“Politics,” Allayeth said. “The aristocratic faction is strongly allied with the upper echelons of the Magic Society in Yaresh. This was intended to be a way for both of them

to take greater control in the messenger conflict. We pushed back as much as we could, but if the Duke went to war with the aristocratic faction, the city administration would have collapsed in the infighting and made things worse.”

“I was given a surprising amount of leeway to cause trouble,” Marcus said. “Normally a local government wouldn’t let this much power to swing to the Adventure Society, but now I’m seeing why.”

“The aristocratic faction isn’t broken, but they’re on the back foot now. You’ll find a lot of these buildings are empty shells after resources were diverted back to the city. Now things are only getting started there and we have this half-finished mess.”

“Have you been into the chasm?”

“Some way down, until the ambient magic became unstable.”

“Does it stay anywhere near as wide as the aperture as it continues down?”

“Yes, although it’s not uniform. Some sections are akin to an oversized mine shaft while others are more twisty and cavernous. There are even sections that are honeycombed with smaller tunnels instead of one massive one.”

“How did they do this? Displacing that much earth when digging up from below would be hard even with magic. By all accounts, the elemental messengers are fairly mindless, so I don’t imagine they have any engineers.”

“It looks like they used mixed methods, from what I saw. There was evidence of dimensional displacement, stone-shaping, magma tunnels. Clive Standish suspects that their elemental powers allow them to create or annihilate matter that is substantively elemental in nature by tapping into different dimensional layers.”

“Don’t you start. I tried listening to that man explain layers of reality, and I’m not doing it again. Although Asano did give me a slice of rainbow layer cake in an attempt to explain it with visual aids. Delicious, but ultimately futile.”

“You never studied any magical theory?”

“I did meet a scholar who told me I was an expert in applied kinetics, whatever that is.”

“You didn’t ask?”

“I didn’t get a chance before I beat him to death with a fruit cart.”

“How exactly did you wind up as a Continental Council executive?”

“They like to have different people for different situations. I usually get sent places where they need someone to cut through the politics. Not literally, obviously. Unless we want to. We get quite broad discretionary power and I find an axe through someone’s head on the first day helps set a tone.”

## Chapter 758

### What Kind of Adventurer

The expedition team was standing on a platform that hung over one side of the hole. A strong wind blew through the town and over the aperture, creating a low, ominous roar. No one could resist going to the edge and looking down into the roughly circular chasm that was hundreds of metres across. It was a hungry void, devouring what sunlight made it past the bridges and buildings arching over it.

After peering over the edge, the group gathered to examine the vehicles lined up on the platform, waiting to carry them down. Their construction was rough and industrial, designed and assembled with only function in mind. Each looked like something between a crab and a centipede, with hollow backs that contained space for six plus a driver. The seats reminded Jason of amusement park rides, with bars and belts designed to hold people in place through some wild bucking. There were even roll cages over the top of each seating area.

Allayeth, standing in the middle of the platform with Marcus, grabbed everyone's attention with a burst of aura projection. Once everyone had gathered around, she started talking.

"The crawlers won't be as fast as descending through flight," she explained, "but magical conditions are uncertain. These vehicles are designed to operate with maximal reliability and will continue functioning at very low levels of ambient magic. Only those with essence abilities that allow them to employ specialised magical tools can operate them."

That was a standard concern for low-magic zones and had been the norm in Greenstone. Both Belinda and Clive had appropriate abilities.

"If the crawlers detect extreme magical abnormalities or massive fluctuations in ambient magic," Allayeth continued, "they will automatically secure themselves to the walls. This is to prevent them falling in case of malfunction, and this mode will need to be manually overridden to continue."

"A final reminder of command structure," Marcus said, taking over the briefing. He gestured to the elven leader of the team trained by Allayeth.

"Miriam is your tactical commander. When the fighting starts or something else goes wrong, she is in charge. For secondary commanders, those of you not in teams have already been assigned temporary groups. If you can't remember your assigned sub-commander, please jump in the hole now and save us all some time."

Allayeth gave him a sharp look, an unrepentant shrug the closest he came to accepting her silent criticism.

“Clive Standish is in charge of magical operations and investigation,” Marcus continued. “When the magic gets weird, and it will, you do what he says, when he says it. If you don’t, I won’t need to punish you because you’ll have died like an idiot.”

“Mr Xenoria…” Allayeth said through gritted teeth.

“Lastly,” Marcus continued, “Jason Asano is operations commander. Outside of combat, he has the last word in what you will do and how you will do it. I know that it’s unusual to have a silver-ranker in command of a team with a gold-rank contingent, but it’s appropriate for this operation, given his unique qualifications. He has had more experience with cosmic forces and exotic dimensional spaces in the last six years than the rest of us in our entire careers. Combined, probably. The man got in a knife fight with the Builder when he was iron-rank for gods’ sakes.”

“Strictly speaking, only I had a knife,” Jason said. “Also, it didn’t go well. I mean, we stopped him from activating his world engineers, but he did kill me.”

“Jason,” Arabelle spoke up. “Remember when we talked about focusing on professionalism?”

“Sorry,” Jason said. “Look, everyone, we all know the chain of command; the org chart was in all our packets. Marcus just said he wanted to yell it at everyone so it sank in. As long as you actually read the thing, you know who command falls to if I die or turn into a universe or something, so lets—”

“I’m sorry,” Miriam Vance cut in. “Did you just say you might turn into a universe? It sounded like you said you might turn into a universe, but that would be an insane thing for a person to say because people don’t turn into universes. I can’t help but feel like I’d be more comfortable with an operations commander who understands that.”

“That is exactly why Mr Asano is in charge,” Marcus said. “I did say he had unique qualifications. The fact is, he regularly operates outside of any scenario that makes sense to the rest of us. You may have heard about him convincing the Builder to leave the planet. That’s a simplification, but not inaccurate. I’d also like to thank him for deciding to share some of his considerable secrets.”

“Such as being able to turn into a universe?”

“A small universe,” Jason said. “And to be honest, I’m two-thirds universe already. And I will be honest. Mostly. More or less. The fact is, everyone on this expedition is taking a huge risk, and you deserve something approximating the truth of what we might be walking into. I’ve already shared some of this with Lady Allayeth and representative



Xenoria in the planning stage. And, as I said, I'm on the way to being a living universe. Lady Allayeth has seen it for herself. She's also promised to help me murder any Magic Society pricks who try to kidnap and experiment on me. Just throwing that out there.”

His gaze moved to the Magic Society contingent, his reptilian smile giving them chills.

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The crawlers made their way down the walls of the shaft. Just as their appearance suggested, they had been built for practicality over looks or, as became swiftly apparent, comfort. At first, Jason had found it fun, the amusement park seats proving indicative of the ride. A couple of hours in, he reflected that there was a reason park rides only lasted a few minutes. Hanging from the straps and bars holding them in place as the crawlers clunked downwards became very old very fast.

Some of the passengers had means to make things more comfortable. Jason was one of those, calling some cloud stuff from the miniaturised flask on his necklace. It slipped between him and the bars and straps of his seat, smoothing and cushioning his ride. With so many elite gold and silver-rankers, many others likewise had items and abilities that offered comfort. For those that didn't, some requested through Jason's party interface to make their own way down. This was immediately refused by Miriam Vance.

Miriam had joined half of team Biscuit in one of the crawlers so she could continue talking with Jason. They could have used the interface but she wanted to question him in person. Clive was driving, with Humphrey, Sophie, Rufus and Stash as the other passengers. Stash had enjoyed the experience at first, taking the form of a celestine version of an adolescent Humphrey with silver eyes and hair.

It did not take long before Stash started complaining to be let out, Humphrey and Sophie repeatedly calming him down. It was a sign of his growing maturity that he actually stayed put, despite his complaints, instead of turning into a bird and flying off. He did shift his form to be significantly rotund, however.

“It's for cushioning,” he insisted.

The jerky ride where everyone was hanging face down was not conducive to conversation, even through voice chat. But once Jason had padded his ride and Miriam did something similar with an air-conjuration power, she continued probing him with questions.

“So, you're turning into one of the messengers' leaders, but that isn't the same as turning into a messenger?”

“No,” Jason said. “Astral king seems to be an end-state for messenger advancement, but being a messenger isn't a requirement. Messengers are capable of developing the

aspects required to become an astral king naturally, although we don't know how that is triggered. The diamond-rank messengers are all obsessed with that secret, by all accounts."

"But there are unnatural means of developing those aspects?" Miriam asked.

"I'd prefer to use the term artificial," Jason said. "But yes. The elements that make someone an astral king can be acquired through external means. It's the way I'm doing it, and it turns out I'm not the first. Clive dug out some records in the diamond-rank messenger's study that are old even by cosmic standards. These records seem to imply that the messenger race itself originated with astral kings who weren't messengers because the messengers didn't exist yet."

"It's not definitive," Clive called back with a grunt from where he was piloting the crawler. "Is the ride getting any better? I think I'm slowly coming to grips with this thing."

"Not getting better so much as less awful," Sophie told him. "But you're doing well, Clive; keep it up."

Jason smiled to himself as Sophie casually supported her teammate. It was worlds from the porcupine she had been when they first met.

"The documents I found contradict messenger indoctrination, which is some piffle about having always existed as the living will of the universe," Clive continued, his tone distracted as he drove the crawler. "There was reference to messenger precursor astral kings it called 'originals,' although whether they were the actual source of the first messengers I don't know. There was nothing on where the birthing tree planets came from—WHO PUT THAT BLOODY ROCK THERE?"

The crawler jolted hard, slamming Jason against the restraining bar even through his cloud cushioning.

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The crawlers moved slower and far less comfortably than the adventurers would have descended under their own power. On reaching a sloped section of the shaft that became almost horizontal for a long stretch, they called a stop to rest. A small army of relieved adventurers got out to stretch their legs, a handful of familiars frolicking around them. Jason and the others from his crawler stood next to it, stretching out their limbs.

"Are you sensing that?" Jason asked Miriam who nodded.

"Elementals," she said. "We were expecting them sooner or later."

Elementals weren't monsters in the strictest sense. They were still the result of a magical manifestation, but rather than form a body entirely from magic, they were real elemental matter, infused with magic. The result was an animated and aggressive mass of

elemental substance. Most elementals were comprised of earth, air, fire or water, but many variants existed based on the environments in which they appeared.

Jason's early career in Greenstone had included mud elementals in the delta and sand elementals in the desert. A silver-rank water elemental known as an elemental tyrant had left the first and still largest of his scars after almost killing him. An elemental had once emerged from the Greenstone sewerage system during Jason's time there, a battle he was grateful to have not participated in.

"I'm only sensing silver-rankers," Jason said. "Given that elementals are as subtle as a bridge collapse with their auras, I don't think I'm missing any gold-rankers amongst them."

"Then you should take them on alone," Humphrey said.

"You can't sense how many there are," Miriam told him. "There are at least a hundred of them."

"Good," Humphrey said. "A lot of the people in this expedition see Jason as a political appointment. Someone who is important to the mission but doesn't have their respect as an adventurer. The way Representative Xenoria introduced him didn't help with that."

"I don't think getting him killed will help with that either," Miriam said.

"It will when he comes back," Sophie muttered. "He always does, usually with some ridiculous new power."

"Commander Vance," Humphrey said. "Jason repeatedly finds himself at the nexus of grand events. This leads people to overlook the fact that he is, in fact, an excellent adventurer. This expedition is filled with guild elites, hand-picked for this mission. I would hold Jason up against any of them. There is a fight coming which makes how to face it your decision. If you want to see what kind of adventurer your operations commander is, now is the safest chance you'll get before the magic goes weird on us."

"Also, he's already gone," Sophie pointed out.

Miriam looked around and saw that Jason had, indeed, slipped away without her aura senses registering his sudden absence.

"How?"

She expanded her senses over the distant elementals, swarming up the tunnel. She noted shadow creatures spreading out amongst them and sensed Asano right in the middle.

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Elementals surged upslope along the tunnel, covering the walls, floor and roof. They were all conglomerations of loose elemental material, from formless masses to highly

specific shapes. A mound of earth slid along the tunnel as a deer made of tiny stone fragments pranced alongside it. There was what looked like a child's crude attempt at a clay tortoise, except the size of a small house. A winged gorilla made of magma loped along, taking to the air in long, gliding leaps.

The only light was shed by the more fire-related elementals, mostly magma creatures glowing in the dark. Shade's bodies went unnoticed, but when Jason strolled out of one it was a different story. His cloak of stars shone brightly, draped around him to the point that he looked engulfed in a starry void.

Jason walked with hands clasped leisurely behind his back. A shadow arm drew his sword, Hegemon's Will, that Gary had forged for him. He used his Doom Blade ability, but instead of conjuring a dagger, the power was bestowed on the sword. The rune letters running down the black blade turned from white to red.

- 
- You have invoked the effects of [Ruin, Blade of Tribulation]. All properties of that weapon have been imbued into [Hegemon's Will]. Necrotic damage will be inflicted in addition to physical damage.
- 

In contrast to Jason's slow meander, the shadow arm flickered around Jason in a blur of motion, the speed, reach and flexibility beyond what his natural arms could achieve. The blade did little more than scratch the elementals with solid physical forms, while those comprised of fire or smoky ash seemed to flinch from the blade's touch. Each hit landed special attacks, delivering affliction after affliction, Jason chanting spells that did the same.

*"Bleed for me."*

*"Carry the mark of your transgressions."*

*"Your fate is to suffer."*

Elementals surged at Jason only to pass harmlessly through one of Shade's intangible bodies, Jason having already moved on. He didn't rush, always stepping into a Shade body with perfect timing to casually avoid attacks.

The greatest weakness of elementals was their mindlessness, without even the mental capacity of the simplest insect. Combined with the relative slowness of the mostly earth-type elementals, their inability to learn allowed Jason to lead them around by the nose, delivering afflictions with impunity. His mobility moved him from one area of the fight to another, the imbecilic elementals always playing catch up.

- 
- [Castigate] has inflicted [Mortality], [Sin], [Mark of Sin], and [Weight of Sin]. You have gained [Marshal of Judgement].

- [Haemorrhage] had inflicted [Blood From a Stone], [Bleeding], [Sacrificial Victim] and [Necrotoxin].
  - [Punish] has inflicted [Sin], [Price of Absolution] and [Wages of Sin].
  - [Hand of the Reaper] has inflicted [Weakness of the Flesh], [Creeping Death] and [Rigor Mortis].
  - [Hegemon's Will] has drained mana and inflicted necrotic damage, [Corrosion], [Vulnerable] and [Hegemon's Tribute].
  - [Leech Bite] has refreshed [Bleeding] and inflicted [Leech Toxin] and [Tainted Meridians].
  - [Inexorable Doom] has inflicted [Inexorable Doom], [Inescapable] and [Persecution].
- 

The oppressive weight of afflictions left stone bleeding and magma rotting like a week-old corpse. The elementals ignored their unnatural suffering, having no sense of fear, pain or even the self-preservation instinct of an animal. They kept pointlessly chasing Jason around as he strolled through them, moving in and out of Shade's bodies.

If Jason went through the elementals one by one, destroying them all would take far too long. He had the endurance for it, able to replenish himself by feeding on afflictions, but it was better to send his dark powers spreading through the enemy.

In a surge of aura, Gordon appeared above Jason's head, his massive, nebulous eye blazing in the dark. His floating orb eyes shot out, seeking out afflicted elementals to sink into. Those elementals immediately started spawning butterflies that carried their afflictions to fresh victims.

Jason had not done well fighting large groups of late. The affliction-spreading butterflies were extremely effective if allowed to do their work, but it was a more complex process than poison clouds or just affecting huge crowds. He lacked the variety of simple and effective methods that traditional affliction specialists had access to, although he found himself not regretting their absence. As an affliction skirmisher, he wasn't stuck behind a team, mindlessly throwing out spells and left helpless if something went wrong.

He considered his independence and versatility well worth the trade-off of not easily and efficiently blanketing an area with his powers. That trade-off was real, however, as the complexity of the afflictions-spreading butterflies as a medium offered a key failure point for intelligent enemies to target. The butterflies were all but unstoppable after reaching a critical mass, but could be shut down with sufficiently swift and diligent action. During the battle of Yaresh, the messengers had been swift to eliminate any butterflies, and even their own monsters once they were affected. This had shut down Jason's ability to have a massive impact on the tactical situation.

The higher rank the enemies, the smarter they tended to be. The elementals were the opposite of intelligent, however, and the butterflies were soon swarming over them in such

a thick cloud it was hard to see. The darkness of the tunnel was gone, the glowing butterflies filling the space with blue and orange light. The display was as beautiful as the results were ugly as stone oozed rotting pus and fire shed black, poisoned blood that was immediately boiled to steam.

The stench of tainted, coppery blood and rancid death filled the air. It would have choked anyone that needed to breathe. The days of Jason failing to bleed enemies just because they had no blood, or to rot enemies because they had no flesh were behind him. His powers made the impossible possible, which was the purpose of magic, after all. The afflicted elementals were now vulnerable to that which they should have been impervious, marking the time to finish things. Jason held out his hands and his palms grew slick with blood that seeped through his skin. A moment later leeches erupted from his hands, geysering over the elementals.

Normally, Colin would not be able to feast on creatures of stone and earth, but Jason's had left them susceptible to his predations. Only the fire and magma elementals could hold him off, their heat slaying any individual leeches that grew close. Jason ignored this, the elementals too stupid to capitalise on it. Colin devoured the others, growing his leech swarm faster than it burned away.

The elementals Colin couldn't devour, Jason took care of. He drained the foul afflictions from all the fire and magma elementals at once, leaving holy afflictions in their place. The clean light of transcendent damage destroyed them from within, eating away at them even faster than the bleeding and the rot. Jason used his execute ability, Verdict, to detonate that power, finishing off the individual elementals that seemed to be holding up the best, like the giant clay tortoise.

From that stage, the massacre ended in short order. Shade was already moving through the dead by the time it was over, touching them to make them lootable.

"This should be a good haul of quintessence," Jason mused.

"Indeed, Mr Asano," Shade agreed. "Miss Farrah and Mr Standish may put them to good use in rituals during our time underground."

Jason triggered the loot, rainbow smoke rising from the remains of the elementals. Unlike ordinary silver-rank monsters, this did not eliminate the bodies entirely. Aside from those annihilated by transcendent damage, the elemental substance remained, stained and deformed with blood and necrosis that shouldn't have been possible. Remnants painted the walls and dripped from the roof, Jason's cloak deflecting rancid gobbets as he stood amongst the remains, judiciously pouring crystal wash down the length of his fouled blade.

## Chapter 759

### Gary's Old Team

"You were being optimistic," Jason told Humphrey. "If you kill a whole parcel of monsters in front of some elite adventurers, the result won't be an awed crowd. It'll be a cluster of wildly self-confident people explaining how they would have done it faster and looked better doing it."

"Actually," Clive said from the driver's seat, "they mostly complained about the smell. You left a lot of disgusting goo back there and we had to take the crawlers right through it."

Clive had been the man to drive their crawler through the foul remains of the elementals. As he said, the stench had been potent.

"Something dripped on my head while we were going through there," Rufus complained. "I washed it off but I can still feel it, like a phantom limb. I need some crystal wash to get rid of it."

"There's nothing wrong with soap," Jason told him.

"Jason, I just want the others to stop overlooking you," Humphrey said. "If someone decides they know better than you and choose to ignore your orders, it could be disastrous."

"I appreciate the thought," Jason said, "but most of the people on this expedition are our friends, remember? The Adventure Society didn't trust enough of the locals to not be compromised by the messengers."

"This expedition being full of our people is the source of the problem," Humphrey said. "People think you've been put in charge because of the important events you keep getting caught up in. They don't think you earned your command of this expedition through adventuring."

"And they're right," Jason told him. "I'm a silver-ranker, Humphrey. The best silver-ranker in the world doesn't get put in charge of gold-rankers unless there's some extremely extenuating circumstances. And I went off to kill those elementals alone because you suggested it, but it all felt very performative. I'm not the same guy who faced off with Rick and his team in the mirage chamber way back when. I'm an adventurer to do the job, not to show off."

Jason's teammates shared a glance, even Clive dropping his attention from driving to crane his neck around.

"What?" Jason asked.

A coughing sound came from Jason's shadow.

“Is everything alright, Shade?” Jason asked.

“Of course, Mr Asano. I just had something caught in my throat.”

“Shade, you don’t have a throat.”

\*\*\*

The massive numbers in which the elementals appeared the first time proved to be the norm and not the exception. Even a monster surge rarely saw monsters appear in such concentrations, reminding Jason more of the proto-spaces and monster waves back on Earth. Elementals weren’t the only monsters to appear, although they were the majority. Even when others monsters types showed up, there were always at least a few elementals tagging along.

The expedition's first truly challenging battle came in a vertical section of the shaft. Gold-rank spider moles dug out through the sides of the shaft and started hitting the crawlers with webs, sending the expedition into chaos. Torrents of thick, viscous webbing hit the slow-moving crawlers in rapid succession, striking even before the dust cleared from when the spider moles burst through the rock and into the tunnel.

Along with the spider moles were diamond-tooth worms, whose rank was only silver. They had oily, sickly grey skin and maws full of crystalline teeth stained by ichor. Like the spiders, the worms erupted from the sides of the tunnel, smashing through the rock. They didn’t fully emerge, however, jutting from the sides of the tunnels like cilia. They flailed their lengthy bodies, the teeth for which they were named able to shear through the metal of the crawlers.

Finishing up the onslaught was the usual smattering of elementals, although there was an unusual deficit of earth types. This time it was gaseous elementals that exploded when exposed to fire before reforming, along with flying fire elementals to set them off.

Miriam Vance swiftly took charge, firing off commands through Jason’s voice chat. The expedition was in a mess, scattered and pinned to the walls by viscous webbing. The gold-rankers fought their way free of the webbing with abilities or raw strength. They were swiftly deployed to intercept the gold-rank spider moles before they could wreak havoc amongst the weaker adventurers.

The spider moles were the clear threat, being gold-rank where the worms and elementals were silver. They were massive spiders with long bodies covered in long, stiff bristles. Their heads were squat-faced, more like a pug dog than a mole, despite the name. They also had an array of special abilities, which was common in gold-rank monsters. Along with the viscous webbing that had caught up the crawlers, they could project an alternate type of web that was razor sharp and laced with poison. At close



range, they could fire bristles from all over their bodies that were forearm-length needles, also sharp and venomous.

The spider moles each had eight strong but wiry legs that let them scurry along the vertical surface of the tunnel, despite their massive size. Oversized claws dug into the rock walls and could burrow through armour as swiftly as they could earth and stone. The rapid ambush through the walls demonstrated just how fast that was.

The other ability facilitating the ambush was the power to mask the auras of not just themselves but the other monsters as well. Even Jason and the gold-rankers hadn't sensed them until the trap was sprung. Overall, the spider moles weren't especially powerful by gold-rank standards, but they were numerous. More importantly, the disarray in which the expedition of elite adventurers had been left was an important lesson: Even a less powerful monster could be extremely dangerous in the right environment.

With the crawlers stuck to the walls and the adventurers stuck inside them, the monsters had easily seized the initiative. The gold-rank adventurers had swiftly escaped the webbing and moved to engage the spider moles at Miriam's direction. Many of the silver-rankers also extracted themselves quickly and Miriam had them divide into two groups. One group was tasked with taking the fight to the monsters, fending off the explosive elementals and worms biting at the crawlers. The rest of the group were tasked with protecting the vehicles while extracting the adventurers unable to free themselves from the gold-rank webbing.

Jason's team were part of the protection and extraction group. Sophie, Humphrey, and Taika intercepted monsters. Jason's sword was able to corrode and rot the webbing quite well, while Rufus, Farrah and Gary all had powers to burn through them. Belinda and Clive worked on freeing the crawlers, not just the people inside them, while Neil watched over them all. He tossed barriers onto his team and threw Life Bolt spells at any injured adventurers the team released.

Their familiars also went to work. Gordon's disruptive-force beams were highly effective against the flaming and gaseous elementals. Belinda's astral lamp familiar, Shimmer, was equally effective with its rapid-fire force bolts. Stash turned into a flying fire octopus, burning tentacles effective at tearing webbing from the vehicles.

Leeches slithered up the wall, unimpeded by massive patches of webbing that painted the sides of the shaft. The adhesive in the webs slid right off Colin's slick leech bodies as they crawled over and through. Colin was on a mission to prove the tunnel was only big enough for one set of horrifying toothy worms.

Onslow was serving as a bunker for Neil, Clive and Belinda to work from. It was also a place to bring freed silver-rankers into, giving them a moment to gather themselves and prepare before joining the fight.

Dead monsters were soon falling down the shaft, be it severed worm halves or the crystalline powder left behind by the elementals on their deaths, smoky white for gas and orange for fire. Shade's bodies floated through the air, touching them for Jason to loot. He did so immediately, the monsters trailing rainbow smoke down the shaft as they fell while disintegrating. Not all the dead monsters fell, many landing in the web patches, including the ones holding the crawlers in place. More than a few adventurers had a heavy sprinkling of elemental power over their bodies.

"Such a waste," Clive muttered as another cloud of dust drifted past Onslow's shell. "So many good ritual materials, falling down a hole. I hope you're getting that elemental powder as loot, Jason."

"Haven't been taking the time to check," Jason said.

While continuing to cut away the webbing and free adventurers, Jason did take the time to occasionally cast his Blood Harvest spell. Catching every enemy corpse left by his own side in a considerable range, Jason drew in bright red streams of life force from across the battlefield.

- 
- You have gained health, stamina, mana and [Blood Frenzy] from [Blood Harvest].
  - Health, stamina and mana have exceeded normal values due to ability [Sin Eater].
  - [Blood Frenzy] (boon, unholy, stacking): Bonus to [Speed] and [Recovery]. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, up to a maximum threshold.
- 

With the preponderance of monsters, Jason had no shortage of bodies to drain the remnant life force from. That mostly meant worms as the elementals couldn't be drained unless his Blood From a Stone had made them vulnerable to blood magic. As he was busy freeing adventurers, he hadn't had time, although he got a few windfalls in the way of spider moles as the gold-rankers started to shave their numbers.

Even the lingering life force in just a few of the gold-rank corpses was a massive amount to Jason. By the time all the adventurers had been released, he had buffed himself powerfully.

- 
- You have gained health, stamina, mana and [Blood Frenzy] from [Blood Harvest].
  - Your [Speed] and [Recovery] have reached maximal levels for your current rank. Further instances of [Blood Frenzy] will be replaced with [Blood of the Immortal].

- [Blood of the Immortal] (boon, healing, unholy, stacking): On suffering damage, an instance is consumed to grant a powerful but short-lived heal-over-time effect. Additional instances can be accumulated but do not have a cumulative effect.
- 

By the time Jason and his team launched themselves into the fight proper, Jason was flush with stolen life force and lightning fast. He even rivalled Sophie for speed, although she still managed to make him look sluggish. Her speed was always active and supported by years of experience and multiple supplemental powers. Compared to the grace, elegance and efficiency with which she soared around the space, Jason was a clumsy oaf. He was fast enough that he didn't feel in slow motion compared to the spider moles, though, which was good enough for him. He wasn't going to hunt them, but he wouldn't be blindsided by raw speed.

The team were variously flying or ensconced in Onslow's floating shell. The battlefield they joined was a disorienting mess of shrieks, roars and explosions, magic light strobing in the dark. The lights on the crawlers were mostly still obscured by webbing, leaving the flashes and blasts of magic to light up the chaos. Projectiles slammed into giant worms and elementals exploded into flames. Tentacles reached out of portals to grab monsters and tear them apart, magic lighting shining on their glistening skin. That was one of Amos Pensinata's abilities.

Jason had queried Miriam about adding his butterflies. The tactical commander said no, which Jason understood. In a messy flying battle where allies and enemies were all mixed up in the dark, the benefits they offered would not be worth the extra chaos.

The adventurers might have started on the back foot, but the battle was slowly but inexorably turning in their favour. The spider moles were certainly smarter than the elementals, but animal cunning wasn't a match for gold-rankers in coordinated teams. While the monsters had the numbers, the adventurers would inevitably claim victory. The question was how much victory would cost.

The crawlers had already been hammered, but assessing how badly would have to wait until the fight was done. The more important threat was to the silver-rankers, a destroyed crawler irrelevant next to a dead adventurer. The most vulnerable group were the magic researchers, the only part of the expedition not made up of guild-level elites. They had been freed from the crawler they were trapped in but didn't join the fight. They were hunkered down on top of their vehicle, hoping to avoid attention.

Jason's team was directed to retrieve them so they could be sheltered inside Onslow. They set out immediately, but they were on the far side of a battlefield full of chaos. Magic

and monsters were flying around and a stray blast of gold-rank webbing could easily take a silver-ranker out of the fight, even if it was unlikely to kill them.

They started making their way across the shaft, fighting their way through. Gary was the only one left behind, to protect and tend to the largest group of now-empty crawlers. Several had taken some hefty damage and his forge powers went to work restoring them. He also fought off enemies threatening to damage them further, mostly the snapping worms writhing from their holes in the wall. Their filthy diamond teeth might have sliced through the metal of the crawler frames, but they broke on the humungous head of the enormous hammer in Gary's hand, so large it looked like it should tip him over from the weight. Gary grinned as he shoved it into the maw of another worm looking to take a bite out of him, watching its teeth shatter like glass. This popped up another message from Jason's party interface.

- 
- [Gary's Medium Hammer] has resisted [Shear Metal].
  - [Craftsman's Ire] has inflicted retaliatory resonating-force damage.
- 

Gary yanked the hammer free and swung it in a wide arc. It crashed into the side of the worm, smashing it into the wall with a wet squelch.

As he dealt with worms, Gary's old team members were with Jason's team as they continued across the shaft. Jason's team took their standard approach to aerial combat, with Humphrey, Sophie, Jason and Taika in flight, alongside temporary member Farrah. She was encased in obsidian armour that glowed magma hot around the plates. Wings of fire carried her along, somewhat ponderously with the heavy stone armour. Not ponderous was her flailing chain sword, shards of obsidian threaded on a thick strand of lava.

Farrah's sword was especially effective against the worms, more and more of which kept bursting from the walls. Their length was such that they could reach more than halfway across the shaft without leaving their holes, meaning that no fliers were completely out of reach. Any that extended Farrah's way found her sword corkscrewed along its body, obsidian shards digging into it and lava rope searing its ugly flesh. That only lasted a moment, though, as Farrah retracted her weapon back into a normal greatsword shape. As it did so, it chewed up the worm like a red-hot meat grinder, leaving the dead remains to drop limply against the wall.

Rufus didn't fly but it was hard to tell as he sailed through the air. He used the enemies themselves as platforms, leaping from the wall to a worm's head to even kicking off a hairy spider mole to vault through the air. When there wasn't a foe to stand on, one of his two short-range teleport abilities could reposition him perfectly. His sun sword carved

chunks from the worms while his moon sword slashed through the fire and gas elementals, leaving them diminished in size.

Rufus demonstrated his increasing synergy with his new team' as he moved through the air. Belinda, doing her usual job of versatile mixed support, conjured platforms in the air for Rufus to use as stepping stones before they fell away.

Jason laughed riotously on seeing Rufus hopscotch a series of falling platforms, shadow-jumping nearby to give him two thumbs up.

"It's a-me, Rufus!"

Rufus was taken aback when Jason appeared right in front of him and slipped. His foot missed the platform and his head bounced off it instead, sending him spinning down into the darkness of the shaft. Jason winced.

"Oops."

"Jason!" Humphrey snarled.

"Sorry."

Rufus teleported atop an approaching worm and buried his sun sword in its body. Using it as a handle to hold himself in place, he glared at Jason but only for a moment. The sword flared bright enough that light shone from inside the worm and Rufus ran along the creature's body towards the wall in an implausible display of balance. He dragged the sword, still deep in the creature and moving as if through the air and not the dense flesh of a giant silver-rank worm. Rufus reached the wall and started running along it, leaving the worm's two halves dangling, dead.

Jason floated in the air, watching in awe.

"Holy crap, that looked awesome."

"Jason!" Humphrey scolded again.

"Sorry."

## Chapter 760

### Hit Points

The massive vertical shaft was thick with battle. The gold-rank adventurers were doing their best to keep the fight with the spider moles away from the crawlers and the lower-rank adventurers. The silver-rank adventurers had even more to deal with, as at least the spider mole numbers weren't increasing. Gas and fire elementals kept pouring in through holes in the wall. Even more prolific were the toothy worms, continually burrowing their way out of the rock to extend from the walls like tentacles.

Worm after worm dug through and extended their sickly grey bodies in search of something to devour. The metal of armour or the crawlers would do, although the way they grew agitated at the smell of blood revealed their true preference. As the battle continued, they just kept coming until the shaft was a vertical, fleshy forest. As the worms could reach more than halfway across the shaft, there was no escaping them. They could only be fought through, which is exactly what Jason and his team did. The team were in the process of making their way to the Magic Society research team, to secure them inside Onslow's shell.

Jason suggested he go ahead alone and portal the researchers to Onslow, but Humphrey nixed the idea. While Jason going off alone was barely acceptable, portals had become unreliable as the expedition drew closer to the natural array. Instantaneous teleportation, like Humphrey and Jason's, still worked, but sustained dimensional apertures — portals — quickly grew volatile and exploded. This included dimensional bags and certain storage spaces, like Clive's portal-based storage, which the expedition discovered at the cost of some supplies.

The expedition had back-tracked to a safer level and transferred the most important supplies to the crawlers in magically reinforced bags which made any threat to the crawlers more dangerous. Along with the gold-rank coins to sustain the most powerful members of the expedition, substantial ritual materials would be required to activate the messenger device.

Jason had argued that he could probably stabilise his own portals by tapping into his astral throne, but Humphrey said no. Along with the uncertainty of that working, he didn't want Jason debilitated from drawing on his astral king powers too much. Jason had argued that he would probably be fine, losing the debate at the word 'probably.'

Thus, the team continued to slog their way across the shaft, fighting through elementals and worms while dodging stray blasts of webbing and poorly aimed projectiles from the gold-rank battle.

Farrah focused on the fire elementals, her Child of Fire ability making a mockery of them. Even completely immolated, their flames didn't so much as singe her hair. Even more ridiculously, her own powers were burning creatures that were themselves made of fire.

"How does that make any sense?" Jason asked.

"You made a rock bleed to death," Farrah shot back.

"I will not apologise for being awesome."

"What was that?" Farrah asked. "You were trying to explain how I'm the one doing ridiculous things but I couldn't hear it over the sound of you coming back from the dead over and over."

"Oh, like you've never come back to life."

Neil opened a voice channel to Rick Geller.

"Rick, I know your team already has a healer, but would you be open to recruiting a second?"

"Are you seriously contacting me to CRACK A DAMN JOKE right now?" Rick roared back.

"Sorry," Neil said contritely and closed the channel.

"Can we please demonstrate at least a little discipline?" Humphrey growled.

"Sorry dad," Belinda said meekly.

"Belinda..." Humphrey admonished.

"Are we not meant to call you daddy?" she asked. "Because Sophie said—"

"LINDY!" Humphrey bellowed, not through voice chat but out loud, audible even amongst the pounding of explosions and the sizzling zap of spells going off.

Humphrey continued to grumble but let it go. Partly it was because he knew they weren't going to stop, but mostly because the banter hadn't slowed them down. Neil was throwing out his short-lived barriers with pinpoint timing. Jason flickered through the shadowy battlefield, loading afflictions on worms not yet engaged by adventurers. Belinda was blasting attacks from the wands she had in each hand, duplicating spells used by Neil and Clive, and also conjuring platforms for Rufus to use.

While Humphrey told himself he preferred stoic professionalism, he let the banter slide so long as the team was getting the job done. Even if the other team leaders made fun of him sometimes.

“Look,” he said in a voice of resigned annoyance. “At least avoid hitting team members in the head and dropping them down the shaft.”

“Yeah, that was my bad,” Jason said.

Humphrey himself was in charge of handling the gaseous elementals that were not only explosive but also inflicted some unpleasant afflictions on anyone they overran. Humphrey detonated them from out of range of his companions, either with his fire breath or flaming dragon sword. They reconstituted shortly after, but couldn't detonate again for a while. That was when he moved in with his Spirit Reaper attack.

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#### Ability: [Spirit Reaper] (Magic)

- **Special Attack (melee, dimension, drain).**
- **Base cost: Low mana and stamina.**
- **Cooldown: None.**
  
- **Current rank: Silver 4 (71%).**
  
- **Effect (Iron):** Inflicts additional disruptive-force damage and drains mana. Has additional effect against incorporeal or semi-corporeal creatures.
  
- **Effect (bronze):** Inflict [Stunned] on incorporeal or semi-incorporeal entities.
  
- **Effect (silver):** Inflict [Radiant Echo] on incorporeal entities.
  
- **[Stunned] (affliction, magic):** Briefly be unable to move, use abilities or control already active abilities. Fully reactive abilities and effects can still be triggered. The duration cannot be refreshed by applying [Stunned] again and being affected multiple times in succession has diminishing returns.
  
- **[Radiant Echo] (affliction, damage over time, magic, stacking):** Deal ongoing disruptive-force damage.

---

The special attack shredded the gaseous elementals, even stunning them briefly while he went to town. He wasn't the only one to do so with the team's familiars backing up him and Farrah.

Stash turned into a floating orb monster, effectively an inflatable skin ball. Known as a gusher, it used compressed air attacks that made a comical noise that Stash was a little too enamoured with. Fortunately, the attacks were as effective at dispersing the elementals as they were at replicating flatulence sounds.

Gordon's disruptive-force beams were highly efficient at tearing apart the insubstantial elementals. The attacks of Belinda's familiar, Shimmer were likewise



effective. The sentient ornate lamp bobbed through the air, shedding silver light and firing rapid streams of force bolts. Belinda's other familiar was the echo spirit, Gemini. She turned into a blurry replica of Humphrey and tore through the elementals with a force sword.

Jason was the member of the group that roamed the furthest from Onslow. Shadow-jumping came as naturally to Jason as walking by this point and trumped even Sophie's mobility in the current conditions. With darkness and shadows everywhere, it wasn't so much a shadow jump as an unrestricted teleport with no cooldown.

For the most part, Jason worked on loading the worms that kept popping out with afflictions. He focused on the ones not fighting adventurers, which weren't hard to find as their numbers grew.

"Are you sure I shouldn't be dropping butterflies?" he asked Miriam.

"Not yet," the tactical commander responded. "We need to finish the gold-rank monsters, extract the crawlers and make a tactical withdrawal. Then will be the time to unleash indiscriminate chaos."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Jason was able to move around the shaft almost with impunity, but he didn't make a great combat reinforcement. He was able to arrive swiftly, but anyone needing urgent help was looking for immediate impact. Someone to start their enemies on the path to a slow, miserable demise wouldn't pull their bacon out of the fire. What Jason could do was be a cleansing wand on a stick.

One of the stronger weapons available to the spider moles was a venom that impeded healing. While they didn't bite, it laced their bristly hair and the razor-sharp net variants of their webs. They also spat it out at close range.

The venom was something the gold-rank healers could handle, but when a stray net blindsided a silver-ranker, that was another issue. Rank disparity had a lot of effects, one being that afflictions were more resistant to under-ranked cleansing.

When Rick's fiancé Hannah was shredded by razor webbing, her twin, Claire, had trouble cleansing it. Jason appeared out of nowhere, drew the poison out with his Feast of Absolution power and vanished again within a few moments. Rick sent a quick thanks through voice chat before going back to fighting worms.

Jason's team was slowly but surely carving a path towards the researchers still hunkered down atop their vehicle. What should have been open space in the middle of the shaft felt like hacking through a jungle made of carnivorous worms. The silver-rank teams tried to avoid interfering with one another, but the larger hazard was the gold-rank battle.

The gold-rank adventurers worked hard to keep their conflict away from the silver-rankers and the crawlers. Their collateral damage could all too easily eliminate expedition members or critical supplies. They did fairly well at this, as while the spider moles had the numbers, they were weaker than the adventurers. The occasional monster still manage to escape the battle while the adventurers were too occupied to pursue, however, and go after one of the silver-rank teams.

Most of the silver-rank teams could put up a unified front against one gold-rank monster. They didn't have to win, just hold it off until the gold-rankers corralled the monster back into their fight. Winning was certainly an option, though, with Rick's team getting revenge for Hannah's poison razor net experience.

The most vulnerable group were the Magic Society researchers, the only team not made up of guild-level elites. They were silver-rankers, but not a combat team, and had been hunkered down on their vehicle since team Storm Shredder cut them loose. When Jason's team was only halfway across the shaft on their mission to retrieve them, Miriam's sent a warning through the command channel of the voice chat.

"Team Biscuit! Loose spider mole on the researchers! Can you handle it?"

Humphrey couldn't see the researchers to teleport to them and he looked to Sophie, the team's expert defensive interceptor. She was tied up helping a team that had suddenly been swarmed with a half-dozen extra worms, just as their defensive specialist was struck by a stray blast of gold-rank webbing. She couldn't abandon them until they freed their team member.

"Jason," Humphrey said.

"On it."

The battlefield was a mess of auras and magic. The spider moles were also able to interfere with aura perception, which was what made their ambush possible. Even Jason had to focus to punch through the noise and pinpoint the researchers, which he did and then immediately vanished.

A spider mole lunged through the air, having launched itself from the wall of the shaft. The Magic Society researchers in its path didn't just wait helplessly, blasting projectiles and raising barriers. The damage was negligible to the gold-rank monster with its inherent damage reduction against lower-ranked attacks. The barriers did a better job of slowing it down but were still smashed through in short order.

Just as the spider mole was about to crash into the researchers, a swarm of shadow arms yanked them out of the way. They were left dangling from the wall like cuts of meat, but the monster had missed them, meaning they weren't actual cuts of dangling meat. The

monster's squat face roared but Jason appeared on its back before it could move on the researchers now being passed hand-to-hand along the wall by the forest of shadow arms. He distracted the monster further by plunging his sword into its back.

Jason's speed was buffed to the point that his reflexes weren't entirely eclipsed by a gold-rank monster. Eight legs were a lot, however, and only three were occupied holding the monster to the wall. The rest snatched at Jason on its back, reaching for him with flexibility beyond any real spider. Needing the spider mole's attention squarely on himself, Jason tried to dodge rather than shadow-jump away, buying time for the researchers until a gold-ranker came to the rescue.

Jason's attempts at evasion lasted roughly no seconds, his feet impeded by the monster's sharp, venomous hair that punched holes in his boots.

- 
- You have resisted [Spider Mole Venom].
  - You have gained [Resistance] and [Integrity] from ability [Sin Eater].
- 

Each of the monster's legs ended in prehensile feet with three long talons. One foot wrapped around Jason's torso and another around his legs, the talons digging deep into his flesh. Jason tried to shadow-jump from the creature's grip but it didn't work. This was normal for when deeply impaled with monster parts, but he tried anyway.

Jason's body resisted the monster's tugging for a brief moment before he was torn in half. Flooded with life force from all the enemies he had drained, fed even more by his potent regenerative powers, Jason had stacked up several times his normal maximum. As a result, he was near-unkillable until that life force had been chewed through. Some of that was consumed to immediately regrow his legs, the new ones flicking from the bottom of his torso like shaking a rug.

Life force was an odd thing, especially when it came to magical bodies and going beyond normal maximums. It sometimes made the body seemingly impervious, other times triggering near-instantaneous bodily restoration. Jason related having excess life force to having hit points that needed to be shaved off before he could take any meaningful damage. It would take more than being ripped in half to finish Jason off, but the monster seemed keen to oblige.

He also reconjured his armour, not liking his bare unmentionables so close to all those bristles. His boxer shorts were not conjured and were still on his old legs. The spider mole had tossed them away and they'd stuck to the webbing-encased crawler below.

The monster moved Jason to dangle helplessly in front of its ugly face. It was like a mole's face but pushed right in as if it'd been hit by a train but was too damn ornery to die.

“I don’t suppose we could talk things through?”

It shrieked in Jason’s face, coating him with phlegm.

---

- You have resisted [Spider Mole Venom].
  - You have gained [Resistance] and [Integrity] from ability [Sin Eater].
- 

The monster’s talons squeezed, talons digging into Jason like fingers digging into a peach. At the same time, bristles erupted from its body, shooting off in every direction. It left the spider mole’s wrinkly skin exposed for a moment before the hair grew back, almost as fast as Jason’s legs. The bristles pincushioned Jason and quite a few of them hit the researchers than were still not that far away. Jason immediately croaked out a spell.

*“Feed me your sins.”*

Feast of Absolution drained the venom not just from the spiked researchers but every adventurer affected by afflictions in a wide area. Trails of red stained with ugly purples, whites and yellows flowed into Jason from all directions.

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- You have absorbed [Spider Mole Venom] from multiple allies.
  - You have absorbed [Smoke Toxin] from multiple allies.
  - You have absorbed [Gaseous Bloat] from multiple allies.
  - You have gained stamina and mana.
  - Stamina and mana have exceeded normal values due to ability [Sin Eater].
  - You have gained multiple instances of [Resistance] and [Integrity] from ability [Sin Eater].
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With Jason held right in front of the monster’s face, the multicoloured light streaming into him obscured the monster’s vision. This prevented it from noticing the mass of leeches seeping out of Jason’s discarded legs below.

The spider mole continued to squeeze, blood oozing around its talons and soaking down its legs and onto its body. The monster had animalistic cunning, but not the intelligence to pay attention to that blood and how oddly lumpy it was. It likewise failed to notice that those lumps had teeth. Oblivious, the monster concentrated on crushing Jason in its grip, surprised at his resilience. Jason’s excess life force was being rapidly consumed to keep him alive.

As Jason’s spell ended and the monster no longer had the light of the spell in its face, it finally realised what was going on below. Jason’s boxer-clad severed legs were now completely buried under a mound of purplish red flesh that had melded together from a massive pile of leeches and was now adhered to the wall. The mound undulated and shifted, Colin still in the process of taking a new form.

The spider mole looked down and shrieked at it, only half-coating Jason in venomous phlegm this time. Seeing the flesh mass as the greater threat, it flung Jason aside with gold-rank strength. It was so hard that he moved horizontally along the wall, barely starting to arc down by the time he struck a rocky protrusion like a bug on a windshield.