

Chapter 716

Actual Adventurers

Jason and Allayeth watched the cloud palace break down into thick fog that obscured the area and replaced the smell of ash and wet mud with a fresh, clean scent. It was slowly drawn into the cloud flask like a massive genie returning to its bottle.

"I'm surprised the city was willing to use the construction magic provided by the messengers so quickly," Jason said.

"I believe that using it to replace your building is a large part of that," Allayeth told him. "The Adventure Society is, I believe, largely on your side. They understand what you've done and how hard you fought for the city during the Battle of Yaresh."

"Plenty of people fought as hard or harder."

"But not quite so loudly," Allayeth pointed out. "You made something of a spectacle of yourself, and more than once. But the way you did it, along with various other concerns, have left the non-adventuring portion of the city elite voicing various concerns."

"Other concerns?"

"You keep doing things the way the messengers do them. Your aura is like theirs and you've hardly been discreet in demonstrating this. During the battle, they challenged you in rather unusual fashion; what people are calling aura speech. You responded not just in kind but in such a way as it resonated over the battleground. Not to mention that you occasionally float around the same way they do, you still refuse to hand over the messenger prisoners, you won't—"

"Point made," Jason acknowledged. "Although I did most of that in direct opposition to the messengers. You said that the city elite were *voicing* concerns, not that they genuinely held them."

"I did say that, yes."

"So they're using me as an easy punching pug to rail against."

"Your rather bold way of conducting yourself has certain unconventional advantages, Jason, but there are very good reasons that most take a more decorous approach. When you mark yourself as an outsider, you make an easy target for exclusionary political tactics."

"I'm familiar with the approach. On my world, my political enemies painted me as a shady, untrustworthy figure as well."

"How did that work out for them?"

"I don't know. I stopped paying attention, saved the world and got out. I wasn't in the best place back then. I say back then, but it hasn't been that long since I left. I've been working a lot on letting go of my anger and vengefulness."

"And how is that going?"

"Calcifer Bynes came out of my portal on his feet. A year ago he would have come out in a bucket."

"That would have had ramifications."

"And that's always been my problem; people keep warning me of ramifications, without considering the ramifications of crossing me. So, I started to show them. I didn't like where that took me. There's a saying on my world about people who fight with monsters and the dangers of becoming monsters themselves. I went further down that path than I like and it's taken me the better part of a year to walk it back."

"And have you?"

"Not all the way and I never will. The danger of that path is that you have to go that way, at least a little, if you're going to fight monsters. The temptation is to keep going. To be the power. It's so easy to justify every step until you find yourself somewhere you can't justify being. At that point, you have to either go back or change who you are, and that's where you lose yourself."

"He still has some way to go," Arabelle said, emerging from the fog. "He still struggles to stand still for more than a minute without explaining how dark and edgy he is to the middle distance."

Jason gave her a thin smile.

"Because I keep finding myself in circumstances that make me confront these issues all over again."

"And you always will," Arabelle told him. "Which leaves you the choice of whining about it for the rest of your life or learning to accept it without a near-constant stream of brooding monologues."

"I'm working on it."

"I know."

"Was there something you wanted, Arabelle?"

"Emir asked me again if you would be willing to speak with his associate."

"I've sensed her probing the cloud house. She hasn't been very polite about it."

"She's a diamond-ranker, Jason. She doesn't have to be."

Jason's expression turned hard and he glanced briefly at Allayeth, then shook his head.

"I am so very tired of being weaker than everything I have to deal with," he muttered.
"Shade, grab the flask when it's done."

"Jason..." Arabelle said. He ignored her and opened a portal arch to his soul realm. He went through and Arabelle made to follow but was repelled by the curtain of energy. The energy vanished and the arch vanished into the ground. Arabelle sighed.

"He normally responds well to some light teasing," she said.

"That was my assessment as well," Allayeth said. "Has something changed?"

"There is little I can share, as Jason is under my care. And even if he were not, my first loyalty is to him, not to you."

Allayeth ran an assessing gaze over Arabelle.

"I have found that the people around Jason lack much of the fearful reverence most have for diamond-rankers. Is that his influence?"

"That, and when you spend enough time around Jason, you meet more than just diamond-rankers."

"Like Dominion randomly appearing in a meeting?"

"Yes."

"Why did a god choose to make that display? I don't believe for a moment that it was a simple whim."

"I have my guesses, but I would not presume to understand the reasoning of a god. Like people, how they portray themselves is no sure indicator of their true nature or intentions. Look at the god Deception taking the role of Purity without anyone knowing. For centuries he warped the church towards the more exclusionary and intolerant aspects of purity as a concept."

"It still unsettles me that the other gods never informed us."

"The gods have their rules, just as we do."

"That fact also unsettles me, along with leaving me conflicted. I'm not sure if I like the idea of the beings that guide the world having rules I don't understand. It makes me wonder about their motives, which is an uncomfortable position to find myself in. I also wonder why the rules are there, and how they are enforced. To what degree can they act beyond their remit?"

"You should talk to Jason about it."

"He has answers?"

"No, but he enjoys the questions. As you saw, he treats the gods the way he treats everyone else."

"Why do they tolerate it?"

“You wondered why Dominion would appear before us all and allow Jason to talk to him like that. Perhaps showing us that he would was the point.”

“I thought you wouldn’t presume to understand the reasoning of a god?”

“That’s why I said ‘perhaps.’ It was a guess.”

“What does showing that he would tolerate Jason like that accomplish?”

“Do you look down on Jason, Lady Allayeth?”

“No.”

“No? There isn’t some part of you that looks at him and files him away under ‘just a silver-ranker’ in your mind?”

“Not *just* a silver-ranker, no. But he is a silver-ranker.”

Arabelle looked at the spot where Jason’s portal vanished.

“I wouldn’t presume to tell a diamond-ranker what to do,” Arabelle lied, “but I would advise against letting Lord Charist make any more oppressive moves towards Jason.”

“I am not his keeper.”

“Aren’t you? I will take my leave, Lady Allayeth.”

The fog had much diminished over the course of their conversation, but a goodly amount was yet to return to the flask. Arabelle walked into it, vanishing from Allayeth’s senses.

The Adventure Society director, Musin Heath, was seated behind the desk in his office, staring at Vidal Ladiv.

“I’m sorry, they did what?” Musin asked.

“They took a contract, Director,” Vidal repeated.

Musin ran his hands through his hair and let out a groan.

“Why would they do that?”

“They are adventurers, Director, and there is no shortage of contracts, as you know. After the attack on the city, there are too few adventurers and too many tasks.”

“I’m well aware of that, Ladiv. I was the one who implemented the campaign to get the inactive adventurers who stepped up to defend the city to stay active. My point is that Asano is the focus of some very important events right now.”

“I would point out, Director, that what you described seems to be Jason Asano’s normal circumstance. If he didn’t take contracts while embroiled in major events, I’m not sure he ever would.”

“I would be okay with that.”

Musin let out a weary sigh.

“What contract did they take?”

“I’m sorry, Director, but I have misspoken. It’s *contracts*, plural.”

“Multiple contracts?”

“There’s an open sweep-and-clear for the northern regions. They’ve registered for that.”

Musin nodded. “The northern regions have been underserved since we started focusing on the infested towns to the south. What else?”

“They’ve claimed a lot of the high-difficulty, low-reward contracts that most adventurers avoid. I spoke to the jobs hall officials and they said they were about to increase the listed reward on most of them. They even offered and Asano’s team declined.”

“I see,” Musin said, then leaned back in his chair. “They’re looking to rank up.”

“That will take years. They’ll be lucky to reach gold by the next monster surge.”

“And if they don’t get started, it’ll take until the monster surge after that. Can you imagine what it’s like being silver-rankers under so much gold and even diamond-rank scrutiny?”

“Yes, Director,” Vidal said flatly and Musin snorted a laugh.

“We’ve made you the message boy in a hailstorm, haven’t we, Ladviv?”

“Asano’s team also collected other contracts, Director. Based on the locations they were choices to fill in the gaps of their intended route. It seems they will be heading out of the city and moving north-east. They’ll make a large, zig-zagging loop and then return to the city from the north-west.”

“How many contracts did they take?”

“Seventy-four.”

“Seventy-four? How long is that going to take them?”

“They’ve reported three as complete so far, Director.”

“They’re delivering reports to the jobs hall through Asano’s shadow familiar?”

“Yes, Director. They have estimated between four and nine days, but any number of factors make it hard to predict.”

“And they’ve done three already. When did they take the contracts?”

Vidal pulled out his pocket watch.

“Approximately six-and-a-half hours ago, Director.”

“They’re keen, I’ll give them that. At least if they’re going to go off and do something, it’s being actual adventurers. If that was the worst behaviour I had to deal with, I’d be the happiest Adventure Society director in the world.”

Musin leaned his elbow on his desk and his forehead in his hand.

"Asano has obligations," he said. "The force to head underground is being formed, with his team as part of it. He also needs to be present for the handing over of the thing he asked for from the messengers."

"I asked him about that before he left, Director. On the latter, he said that he will teleport in as appropriate. As for the force, sir, he made it clear that while he does not need to lead it, he will not be subordinate to it."

"Did you tell him that's not how Adventure Society expeditions work?"

"I did, Director. He said that once the Adventure Society has publicly redressed Lord Charist for invading his home, he would be happy to discuss adherence to society protocols and institutional integrity."

The director closed his eyes and rubbed his temples.

"I'm getting a headache. Should that even be possible?"

"It seems to be going around, Director."

"And by going around, do you mean around Asano?"

"I do, although diamond-rankers tend to elicit similar symptoms. With the extended monster surge, they have been acting far more publicly than normal."

"I knew it," Musin said. "I knew as soon as I got the reports from the Rimaros branch that Asano would be a diamond-rank problem. I have no idea what they were thinking with this false identity business; he was obviously going to become very overt, very quickly."

"This is why you voiced your public support for Asano?"

"You're new to Yaresh, Mr Ladiv. One of the features of our — usually — fine city is that it has two diamond-rankers that are here with reasonable frequency, reasonably openly. One of the results of this is that anyone in my position is required to do their best to manage said diamond-rankers, which is roughly as easy as wrestling a tornado that just passed through a cooking oil warehouse."

"I don't think that's possible, Director."

"No, it is not. And Asano has that feel. The more I read the reports about what he's done, how he's done it and who he's done it with, the more I got that feeling. With a diamond-ranker, Mr Ladiv, all you can do is get on board or get out of the way. Maybe, just maybe, you can nudge them slightly in a direction that won't leave you spending the next month cleaning up after them. Once it was clear that Lord Charist had failed to pressure Asano and Lady Allayeth would be taking charge, I decided to get on board with Asano."

"You may pay for that politically, Director."

"That may be so, Mr Ladiv, but it's still the right choice."

"May I ask why?"

"Because the point of my job isn't accruing political power. The Adventure Society exists to protect the populace. Sometimes that means putting up with people who are a pain to deal with. For all of Lord Charist's headstrong bluster, Lady Allayeth's schemes and Jason Asano's brazen absurdity, each one of them acts in the cause of what they think is right."

"And we just have to hope that what they believe to be right is the same as what we do?"

"We can nudge, where we're able. I've found Lady Allayeth quite reasonable in that regard. She mostly ignores me, yes, but at least she listens first. Lord Charist and Asano don't seem as amenable, but I believe they hew close enough to my own sensibilities."

"Then you will not attempt to curtail Asano and his team's contract activities?"

"Have you read Asano's file?"

"It's restricted, Director. I don't have the authority."

"Well, suffice it to say that time and again, Jason Asano and his team have demonstrated not only that they'll do the right thing but that they'll spot it before most everyone else. Did you know that while Asano was still believed dead, his team discovered that the messengers were preparing to invade? That man Standish is some kind of magical genius. The Magic Society screwed him over and now they're desperate to get him back in the fold."

"And you want to avoid that mistake with Asano?"

"You're damn right I do. He already threatened to give up his Adventure Society membership. I think that was more to make a point than his actual intention, but there's no way I'm going to test that man's resolve."

"Because of what you've read in his file?"

"For a start. The messengers, who won't deal with anyone, will deal with him and think he's some kind of king. The god of Dominion — the god of deciding who gets to be king — showed up for a chat, and not for the first time. If anyone is fool enough to treat Asano like a silver-ranker, they'll pay for it."

"Like Calcifer Bynes."

"Exactly."

"Are you concerned about his father?"

"Not yet. Asano clearly has a role to play, and Gormanston Bynes is nothing if not efficient in squeezing the value out of his enemies before putting them down."

"And after?"

“Bynes is part of the Aristocratic Faction. More than anyone else, they respect powerful backing. I’m hoping he looks at the beings standing behind Asano and backs off.”

“Is that likely?”

“I don’t know. Asano rolled his son, but he hates weakness, especially from his own people. He’s also smart, and going after Asano is not. If anything, I think Gormanston will try to use or ally with him. Asano may have the etiquette of an explosive device, but he is not weak.”

Chapter 717

Bad Influence

Like Jason, Emir had reclaimed his cloud palace as new buildings were swiftly fabricated in their place. As the area once used to hold visiting adventurer vehicles was being reclaimed by the city as they expanded their refugee and rehousing infrastructure, Emir had joined other adventurers in settling his vehicle outside the city walls. He chose a spot to the south not far from where the river emerged from the city, far enough from anything else that he could let it sprawl. The cloud palace took on its full form and size, primarily consisting of five massive towers. They made no attempt to hide their cloud nature and were stained in sunset colours of orange, yellow and teal.

On one of the many terraces adorning the palace towers, Arabelle looked out over the river. Before the attack on the city, the river had been lined with buildings that serviced the water trade and the people who plied it; warehouses, small docks, taverns and brothels. Left outside of the city defences, those buildings had been thoroughly annihilated. What little remained was nothing but flotsam, having become stuck to the river bank instead of drifting downriver like so much other debris.

“You look troubled,” Emir said, joining her in leaning against the rail. “I’m guessing that your talk with Jason did not precipitate him meeting with my increasingly impatient diamond-rank guest.”

“I’m surprised she didn’t just hunt him down herself. He hasn’t been hiding away in his special domain for a while.”

“She’s well-connected amongst diamond-rankers. I suspect she has a better understanding of who and what are standing behind Jason than we do. She’s being extremely careful about pushing him directly, although her patience is wearing thin without his cloud building to poke at.”

“Diamond-rankers aren’t used to waiting or being denied.”

“No. But the irritability of my guest is my problem. What is it that’s troubling you?”

Arabelle didn't answer immediately. She let herself indulge in the quiet moment with her old teammate as they looked out over the river, thick with debris still being flushed out of the city.

“I worry about Jason. About my ability to help him. I’m meant to be the one with all the answers, but his experiences are far outside of anything I’ve even heard of, let alone seen.”

"You seem to be doing well. Compared to what I heard of his early days in Rimaros, he seems not so removed from the boy I knew in Greenstone. More seasoned, more haunted. I've seen it, though. The sharp steel inside him that comes out a little easier than it should."

"I won't discuss the particulars, Emir, you know that."

Emir nodded.

"I'll leave you be," he said.

"I appreciate it. And don't be alarmed if you lose the ability to sense this part of the cloud palace for a little while. I'm expecting someone I can talk about it with."

"A divine visitation?"

"I'm a priestess, Emir; it's hardly out of the ordinary. The only reason the gods appearing to Jason is remarkable is that they don't make personal visitations in public or to non-clergy."

"That's a rather good reason, Belle."

Emir had not long gone when Healer manifested next to Arabelle. She pushed herself off the railing to stand up straight.

"Oh, don't do that on my account," Healer said, leaning himself. After a moment of hesitation, Arabelle returned to her original position next to him.

"I dislike this," he said, looking out at the debris-choked river. "The land needs healing."

"Houses count as part of the land?"

"Are the houses built on the river by elves that far removed from the dams built on the river by beavers?"

"What are beavers?"

"You've never seen them? They're an animal that builds dams. Jason Asano's world has them as well, so I'm told, but they only have one tail and don't shoot poison gas or venomous spines."

"Who told you that about Jason's world?"

"Travis Noble has a habit of talking non-stop when he's nervous. Gabrielle Pellin asks questions like the Knowledge priestess she is, and she is extremely pretty. The poor boy is helpless to the point that Guardian almost sent one of his priests to rescue the boy."

"Why didn't he?"

"I'm not entirely certain. Something the boy said about a little bit of peril."

"I have no idea what that means."

"I decided it was best to not enquire further for myself. Perhaps you could ask the young man with the garuda powers. He's from Asano's world as well."

"I should ask him and not Jason?"

"Jason Asano may be a bad influence."

"A bad influence how?"

"You presumed that I would show up."

"You did show up."

"Which is only going to encourage you, I know."

"I need to talk to someone. Carlos Quilido, Hana Shavar and Neil Devone all have too many biases for the objective perspective I need. I also don't want to share Jason's secrets, and I'm not convinced the healer's oath is enough that a stranger will remain silent."

"You don't trust the oaths my priests take? That you took?"

"You always see enforcement as a last resort, Lord Healer. Your oath is soft because you want people to do right because they choose to, not because they obey. I was in Greenstone. Neil Davone and Jory Tillman aside, the entire clergy was new because you cast out an entire city's worth of your priests for failing their oaths. If you punish people for spreading Jason's secrets that they heard from me, it does not retroactively stop those secrets from having been spilled. I am your priest, Lord Healer. I follow your belief in personal responsibility, but that means I am responsible for my choices. And for the secrets that those under my care have entrusted me with."

"Listen to yourself child. Hear the conviction. Do not doubt yourself or the guidance you give to those who need it. Not even as unusual a case as Jason Asano."

"I don't know that my guidance is enough. How do I lead him when I don't know the way?"

"Then don't lead him. Walk beside him, with a kind word."

"Metaphors are nice, but I need more than that. I need specifics."

"Then be specific."

"He's been getting better."

"And who defines better? He is different, but what makes one state superior to another? Who chooses that?"

"He does. He's getting closer to the person he wants to be."

Healer smiled.

"You fear he is backtracking."

“Regressive behaviour is a normal part of recovery,” Arabelle said. “My concern is that one of his negative behavioural triggers is being forced to endure the same patterns over and over. Or, more precisely, choosing to endure them. One of those patterns is being seen only by his rank when he is operating at a very different level, and this may be the most dangerous to him.”

“Oh?” Healer prompted neutrally.

“It’s at the core of the behavioural loop that took him to the state he asked me to help him escape. Jason acts out his principles. Often regardless of the cost. It was a defence mechanism he developed to cope with his arrival to our world. But he learned to temper that as that cost started to fall on others. He became able to yield when standing on his principles would cause more damage than they prevented.”

Arabelle glanced at her god, who for all the world looked like a friendly older man, patiently listening. No divine aura pounding at her senses, no smothering presence choking off her ability to think.

“Jason’s time on Earth brought these two factors into conflict,” she continued. “Time and again he faced gross betrayals from those he needed to work with. Time and again, he smothered his instinctive responses because retribution would have put his world in danger. Whatever else they may have been, they were the people responsible for shielding the world, so he tolerated actions that, in our world, any adventurer would have killed over. Eventually, Jason was pushed too far, too many times. His principles bent. He became more violent and less compassionate.”

She sighed.

“Which brings us to where we are now,” she continued. “Again he’s faced with the same pattern of people looking to use him in the belief that they can ignore any consequences because of his rank. I know the circumstances aren’t the same, but they are close enough that I have concerns. My encounter with him yesterday suggests that he’s done swallowing his responses. I think Dominion knows this, and that’s why he made an appearance.”

“You would presume to know a god’s motives?”

“I have no right to assert what they were, but I have every right to guess.”

“Bad influence.”

She couldn’t help but smile at the faint whiff of paternal indulgence, knowing that the god hadn’t let that scrap of his aura out by accident.

“I think Jason Asano is done being a silver-ranker,” she said. “I’m worried, both that he will undo the progress he’s made and of the damage he will do in the process.”

"Is that all that worries you?"

"My concern is that I may have even been the final weight that collapsed everything he and I have been building together. I conveyed Emir's latest request from someone very powerful who wants something from him. He left and the next thing I hear he's gone off on a spree of monster-hunting contracts. That's something he's always thrown himself into when he needs to vent negative emotions. He vents them into monsters."

Healer let out a chuckle.

"You think this is funny?"

"I think I don't care for one of my most capable servants miring herself in self-doubt."

Healer held out a hand, pointing to nothing out in front of them. Arabelle then spotted a patch of darkness emerge from the shadow of a tree that had been snapped in half, not far from the palace. The shadow moved through the air in a blur until it floated in front of Healer's hand. The shadowy mass resolved itself into the shape of a person, the dark parts highlighted with white to resemble some of the formalwear she had seen Jason wear.

"Might I have an explanation of this indecorous behaviour, Lord Healer?" Shade asked.

"I need to look in on your contractor."

"Might I suggest following that by looking in on an etiquette tutor?"

"What is it that Jason Asano does to people that makes them so willing to disrespect power?" Healer asked.

"He looks at that power," Shade said, "and asks if its behaviour is deserving of respect. Or, if it instead grabs people and leaves them dangling in the air to use as a scrying tool."

"A not inconsequential point," Healer acknowledged. "Still, damage done, so I may as well go ahead."

Shade turned back into a mass of shadow that then took the form of a ring, like a portal. An image appeared in the ring of Jason at what looked like a village street stall, jiggling a pan over an open flame.

"Can he see and hear us?" Arabelle asked.

"No," Healer said as they listened to Jason speak.

"...haven't managed to find potatoes," he was explaining to a handful of elves gathered around him. "Potatoes are — okay, now that I think about it, it doesn't matter what potatoes are. The point is that ibrilim powder serves much the same purpose as potato starch and I just realised I should never have brought up potatoes at all. Anyway,

the powder will thicken the sauce, but be patient and give it time to do its work. Don't just keep pouring it in or it'll keep thickening and your brown sauce will turn into brown mud. This is something you'll need to develop from experience, as how much powder to use is always a judgement call..."

Jason trailed off and peered up at the ring, narrowing his eyes.

"Shade?" he asked. "I don't know who is messing with my familiar, but you'd best knock it off or I'm coming for you."

"It is I, Jason Asano," Healer said. The people around Jason dropped to their knees.

"My point stands," Jason said, "and if you keep distracting me it'll ruin my sauce. Let go of my friend or I'll start visiting your priests for purposes they aren't going to approve of."

The people around Jason went from kneeling to sprinting away.

"You would interfere with the good work my people do?" Healer asked. "You would go to war with a god?"

"Mate, I was killing priests of Purity before it was cool. I know you're a generally okay bloke, but being a god doesn't give you a pass to be a turd. You let my guy go and I'll let it slide. This time. I don't know what point you're trying to make with this little display of provocation, or who you're trying to make it to, but let Shade go and sod off or you and me have a problem."

The ring vanished and turned back into a shadow mass. It then burst like a dark firework as Shade destroyed his body.

"Did you see his reaction?" Healer said.

"Where you provoked my friend and he threatened my god? Yes, I saw Lord Healer."

"Calm yourself, child, and look deeper. What Jason Asano demonstrated was balance. An odd balance, yes, but he is stronger than he was before. Less likely to lose himself. You helped him find the place he is now, but the journey never ends. You know that. Have faith in yourself and your abilities as a healer."

"He just threatened a god!"

"And a year ago, he'd have been tearing through one of my churches by now. Do you consider threatening a god to be out of character for him?"

"No," Arabelle grudgingly acknowledged. "I suspect that it's kind of his thing."

Chapter 718

Not Like the Ones We Know

In a section of rainforest characterised by tall but intermittent trees rising above the canopy, Jason's cloud palace had taken the form of treehouses connected by rope bridges. The balcony of the largest treehouse has a sequence of hammocks hanging out over the jungle canopy below and most of the team were laying back, lazing and napping in the mid-morning sun. The missing members were Clive, Rufus, Sophie and Humphrey.

"Are they ever going to come out?" Taika asked, laying back with a plate of sliced fruit on his chest.

"Yeah, because you look like you can't wait to get up and get to work," Neil said.

"Leave them be," Jason said. "They're probably tired."

"From what?" Neil asked. Belinda snickered a laugh.

"Let's just say I beefed up the soundproofing on their treehouse last night," Jason said.

Humphrey and Sophie emerged from their treehouse together and everyone turned to look at them with huge grins. Humphrey pressed his lips together as he glared at them, then grabbed Sophie's hand. She looked uncharacteristically startled, going stiff for a moment before squeezing his hand as they moved over the rope bridge together. When they arrived at the central treehouse, Sophie panned her gaze over the team, challenging anyone to make a joke. Everyone hurriedly laid back in their hammocks, Taika complaining as Jason floated a slice of fruit from Taika's plate through the air.

"Sorry we got up late," Humphrey said. "We should probably get to it."

"We already got to it," Jason said. "We knocked off that nest of frog-hippo things right after dawn. Clive is out scouting the location of the next contract now."

"You sent Clive?" Humphrey asked.

"He sent himself," Belinda said. "He wants to broaden his adventuring skill base."

"And if something jumps him and he dies because he's alone?" Sophie asked. "He won't sense a gold-rank monster coming."

"He's got Onslow," Taika pointed out. "I wish I'd gotten a familiar."

"Plus, Shade is with him," Jason said. "And I'm keeping an eye on his aura."

"How far away is he?" Humphrey asked.

"About twenty kilometres that way," Jason said, pointing. "It's nice being out of the city. I can spread out my senses without picking up on thousands of essence users. Very relaxing. Also, Travis, Farrah, Gary and Rufus aren't too far from Clive either."

“They’re putting up some kind of tower to run tests,” Neil said. “Something about not blasting magic through a city.”

“They’re attempting to use magical resonance to communicate across relay points,” Belinda clarified. “What they have now triggers the magical senses of everyone in the area. Essence user senses are too sharp, especially at decent rank. They’re trying to calibrate it so that it uses ambient magic without disrupting that magic. Then, it will be like the background magic of any city filled with essence users, something people can just ignore.”

“I’m pretty sure they’re going to attract monsters as soon as they turn it on,” Jason said, then furrowed his brow. “That might be handy, now that I think about it. We could crank the thing right up, draw in all the monsters and clean up. It could make our sweep and clear mission a lot easier.”

“And how many monsters do you want to face at once?” Humphrey asked.

“I’m plenty used to fighting lots of monsters at once.”

“And how many of those were gold-rank? We’re in a high-magic area, Jason; the odds of bringing multiple golds down on our heads would be higher than I’m willing to tolerate.”

“Fair point,” Jason acknowledged. “Still, how convenient is that tower to set up?”

“It’s about ten metres tall, so not very,” Belinda told him.

“Shame,” Jason mused. “There’s potential there. Maybe the Adventure Society could set some up permanently and just turn them on when they want to lure in the unintelligent and aggressive monsters. Once they...”

Jason trailed off, floated out of his hammock and looked off into the distance.

“I think Clive has run into something,” he said.

“Danger?” Humphrey asked as the others exited their own hammocks.

“Not sure,” Jason said. “He’s found the elementals, but there’s something odd about their auras.”

A circle of glowing runes appeared in the air and a portal appeared in the middle of them a moment later. Clive, covered head to toe in mud, squelched through. His equally muddy familiar floated through after him, the tortoise’s big eyes looking mournfully out from a face caked in filth. The team rushed to gather around him, making sympathetic noises.

“What did you do to the poor little guy?” Sophie said.

“We need to get him into the showers and washed off,” Belinda said. “Clive, go scrub yourself down in that creek over there.”

“Seriously?” Clive asked, holding his arms out to his sides.

“Please don’t drip in the cloud house,” Jason said. “I know it looks like wood flooring but it’s not.”

To make his point, the mud dripping off Clive and Onslow was being wicked away and absorbed by the floor.

“I know I put a lot of crystal wash in the cloud house, but even though it’s diluted in the showers and the cleaning water, the supply isn’t infinite.”

“Oh, isn’t it?” Clive asked.

“No,” Jason said evasively, his eyes darting in Belinda’s direction briefly before his shoulders slumped. “She told you, didn’t she?”

“That you’ve been talking with Jory over a water link about setting up a dedicated alchemy facility exclusively for crystal wash? Yes, she has.”

“Lots of teams have auxiliary adventurers,” Jason said. “It’s not strange to have an alchemist on call.”

“It is when their only job is to make cleaning products,” Clive said. “There aren’t any alchemists doing that.”

Clive frowned, his expression suggesting he had a thought he wasn’t happy with.

“Okay,” he said. “Yes, there are some auxiliary adventurers who are alchemists that mostly make cleaning products.”

“There are?”

“Clean up teams,” Humphrey said. “You don’t see them so much in smaller cities and low-magic areas where the adventurers don’t specialise as much. In the bigger cities, they have teams dedicated to cleaning up after monster manifestations in urban areas. They literally clean up messes, clear out lesser monster infestations and hunt down any loose monsters summoned during larger fights. There are several teams of this sort in Yaresh leading the hunt for any leftover naga from the egg thing the garuda ate.”

“As much fun as it is talking about soap,” Neil said, “what put you in such drastic need of it?”

“You know how the contract said moderate-sized water and earth elementals?”

“Oh, they merged,” Humphrey said.

“Ah,” Jason said. “That’s what I sensed.”

“Yes,” Clive confirmed. “We now have a very large mud elemental to deal with.”

“Never again!” Neil declared as the team arrived back at the treehouse through Jason and Clive’s portals.

“What?” Jason asked. The others all turned to glare at him. He, Sophie and Belinda were all clean while the others were covered head-to-toe in foul-smelling mud and worse-smelling ichor.

“Jason,” Neil said through gritted teeth. “Not all of us can deflect mud when it’s being flung everywhere.”

“Why am I the problem? Sophie deflected it with her wind powers and Belinda had that hardcore magic umbrella.”

“The issue isn’t so much the mud,” Humphrey said. “That would be an unpleasant but acceptable part of the job.”

“The problem,” Neil said, “is that someone used magic so that the mud monster could bleed and rot. So, when it turned into a mud tornado, it was also a gooey, rotting flesh tornado.”

“Oh, come on,” Jason said. “I already cleansed all the diseases you picked up from it.”

He looked at the rest of the team.

“Okay,” he said. “From your expressions, what I’m taking away is that you feel that cleansing the diseases after the fact isn’t a sufficient response. I’m noting that for future reference so I can take a different approach next time I paint you in rotting corpse meat.”

“Oh no,” Neil said. “There’s no need for ‘future reference’ because you don’t get to fight any more mud elementals. No water elementals and definitely no wind elementals.”

“But fire elementals are alright?”

“Absolutely not,” Sophie said. “The smell of burnt, rotting flesh? No thank you.”

“You didn’t even get muddy,” Jason complained to her. “In fact, I saw you wind blast a bunch of gunk away from you and onto Neil.”

“It was you?” Neil asked, wheeling on the very clean Sophie. “I thought that was Jason.”

“Why would it be me?” Jason asked. “I don’t have wind abilities.”

“We don’t know that,” Neil said. “You’re always pulling out some nonsensical new soul power. It could have been spirit wind or something.”

“Ghost farts. You think I’m making ghost farts.”

“Ghost farts,” Clive said, “is where I leave in search of an adult conversation. Or a shower.”

The non-clean members of the team, which was the majority, made agreeing sounds and marched inside.

“Hey, don’t forget that very lovely stream out there,” Jason called after them encouragingly. “The crystal wash really won’t last if you keep—”

They all felt a massive magical explosion with their supernatural senses, the sound following like thunder after lightning. They rushed back onto the balcony and looked out as a cloud of dirt and dust rose far above the rainforest canopy. It was dozens of miles away, but the mushroom-shaped cloud would have been easy to spot even without silver-rank vision.

“What is that?” Neil asked.

“Can’t tell from this distance,” Clive said.

Jason took enough crystal wash vials from his inventory for everyone and floated them to the team using his aura.

“We’ve still got a few minutes on the portal cooldowns,” he said. “Clean up while Shade turns into something fast and we’ll fly there. We’ll pick up the others on the way.”

The black private jet was still some way from the mushroom cloud of dust when the plane dissolved into a cloud of shadows. Jason and his companions, now including Farrah, Rufus and Gary, all fell from it and into the air. Only Travis had been left behind, ferried back to the tree house by one of Shade’s bodies in the form of a winged Heidel.

“I can feel what you turned into,” Jason scolded his familiar. “What’s wrong with a regular Pegasus?”

“I believe you have more important things to hold your attention, Mr Asano.”

As the team fell, Sophie activated her flight power, taking control of the wind around them.

Ability: [Leaf on the Wind] (Wind)

- Special ability (movement, dimension).
- Cost: Moderate mana-per-second.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Silver 4 (47%)

- Effect (iron): Glide through the air; highly effective at riding the wind. Can reduce weight to slow fall at a reduced mana cost. Ignore or ride the effects of strong wind, even when this ability is not in active use.

- Effect (bronze): Moderate control of nearby airflow while in use. Cost of gliding reduced to low mana-per-second. Strong winds increase your rate of stamina and mana recovery, even when this ability is not in active use.

- **Effect (silver):** Fly for moderate mana-per-second; highly effective at riding the wind. Gliding no longer costs mana. You can control the airflow around you, including using winds to carry others with you when you fly. Carrying others increases the ongoing mana cost and incurs a speed penalty, both scaling with the number of people carried.
-

Sophie's wind-based flight could scoop up others to let them fly as well and she used it on Belinda, Clive, Rufus and Gary. Jason used his cloak to float while Humphrey, Farrah and Taika conjured wings. Neil plummeted as he fumbled at his belt buckle while tumbling end over end. Finally, he managed to activate the flight power enchanted into the belt and arrested his fall, waiting for the others to catch up in their more sedate descent.

"That's hilarious," Neil said to Sophie. His words were sarcastic but the team were sincere in voicing their agreement.

"Do you all want to get healed or not?" Neil asked them and they all looked away with unconvincing expressions of innocence.

"Is anyone sensing anything from that cloud?" Humphrey asked. "All I'm getting is some kind of elemental energy. Jason, you have the sharpest senses."

"There is something in there," Jason said. "Lot of... creatures? Could be elementals. They're infused with elemental power, just like the cloud. I can only pick them out because it's more concentrated."

"If there are elementals, Jason has to leave," Neil said. "We just talked about this."

"Anything else?" Humphrey asked, ignoring Neil.

"Adventurers," Jason said. "We aren't the only team responding."

"Hardly a surprise," Sophie said. "You can probably see that cloud from Yaresh."

"Anyone we know?" Humphrey asked.

"Korinne's team," Jason said. "Rick's too; they came through a portal with a gold-ranker. I think..."

Jason trailed off and turned narrowed his gaze at the plume.

"I know what's in there," he said. "Messengers, but not like the ones we know. There's something wrong with them."

"If they're infused with elemental power," Clive said, "that suggests that these are the warped messengers from underground that we heard about. I think they might not be underground anymore."

"Okay," Neil said. "Jason doesn't have to leave."

Chapter 719

A Juice Newton Situation

Summoned familiars occupied parts of their summoner when not manifested. Colin occupied Jason's blood, Shade his shadow and Gordon his aura. Clive's familiar, Onslow, became a magical tattoo on Clive's abdomen that he could tap into for elemental power.

Clive, like Jason, favoured practical combat robes, with his lighter colour preferences that made him a Jedi to Jason's Sith. Onslow's tattoo lit up, visible through the robes, transforming into energy that passed harmlessly through the fabric. The energy gathered together, manifesting into Onslow's familiar rune tortoise shape, his legs dangling as he floated in the air.

Onslow's shell expanded, detaching from Onslow himself who became an adorable, child-sized humanoid tortoise. The sides of the enlarging shell were largely open, the gaps filled with a wind magic barrier. Sophie moved the team members she was holding aloft with her flight power inside, the two wind powers gently stirring the air as they came together without impeding one another.

The members of the team with self-propelled flight made their way in as well. They joined the others as they observed the humungous dust cloud, still some distance away. Like Onslow, the cloud was charged with elemental energy, but where his powers were in balance, the cloud had specific affinities.

Sensations of fire, earth, ash and magma pushed against the team's perceptions as they moved closer to the giant mushroom cloud. It increasingly loomed over them, dust and ash choking the air. It stung their eyes and left the air tasting smoky, bitter and dead.

They could see tall, angelic silhouettes moving through the murk. Some were making their way out of the cloud, moving to intercept teams of adventurers approaching through the air and across the ground. The terrain below was rough, the rainforest having been flattened for kilometres by the explosion that created the cloud.

Onslow approached the cloud at a steady but cautious speed as Clive used his Enact Ritual power to draw ritual circles made of golden light on the floor and ceiling. Belinda observed him, her eyes darting over the glowing diagrams.

"These aren't the usual protections you employ to protect Onslow," she said.

"No," Clive said, not pausing his work. "These are rituals for channelling elemental energy. They should be able to absorb at least some of any elemental power that comes our way, feeding it to Onslow. That will help recharge his elemental powers and reduce my

need to feed him extra mana, all while offering additional protection. It's not as effective against physical attacks, but I have a feeling that we're heading into a firestorm."

The figures started emerging through the dust and ash enough that they could make them out. As expected, they were messengers, but unlike the ones they were familiar with. Clearly altered by elemental energies, they unleashed elemental attacks at the approaching adventurers. This did not yet include Jason and his companions, but many teams had rushed ahead with more speed than caution. Cones of fire, stone spears, streams of magma and clouds of ash were sent at the adventurers.

The messengers were noticeably different from their unaltered counterparts, the elemental influence on their bodies extremely evident. The group observed four subtypes, each conforming to one of the four power types of elemental attack being tossed around. The messengers were all naked, sexless and androgynous, like the dolls of children, stripped of clothes.

Two of the messenger variants were more visually spectacular than the others. Those throwing out fire also had flames rising from their heads instead of hair. The feathers of their wings alternated between glistening red metal and ruby-like crystal, fire playing across them. Their skin was black and fire shrouded their hands and feet. The ones throwing out magma had skin that was not just black but featured the hard gloss of obsidian. Their wings were obsidian shards outlined by magma, matching the glow of their eyes.

Farrah looked at the magma variants as they clashed with adventurers.

"They're stealing my whole motif," she complained.

"Perhaps if you hadn't given up adventuring to start a business they would have been more respectful," Rufus suggested.

"Coming from a guy who gave up adventuring to become a teacher," she shot back.

"I'm in Jason's team now, aren't I? Anyway, it's an allowable diversion for me. My family runs a school."

Jason took a tray of liquor shots from his inventory and floated them to the group members using his aura.

"Oh, come on," Rufus complained. "I don't think this is the situation for drinking games."

"Oh, it's not just time for drinking," Jason said after the team downed their shoots and he collected the glasses. He put away the tray and took out a cube the size of a basketball with concentric rings engraved on each side. "It's time to rock."

“Rock?” Clive asked, peering at the cube. “Is that some kind of earth element device?”

“No, it’s an arse-kicking device,” Jason said. He took a recording crystal from his inventory and fitted it into a small slot of the cube. He threw it out of Onslow’s shell and it started to rise slowly into the air, blasting out noise. The magic enchanted into it projected the sound all across the battlefield.

“What is that noise?” Humphrey yelled.

“Metallica,” Farrah said through voice chat. “Heavier than I’d normally go for, but if you’re fighting flame-spewing angels from the bowels of the earth, it’s not really a Juice Newton situation.”

“What kind of juice?” Rufus asked. “I don’t think anyone should go to Jason’s planet. It makes them turn strange.”

Jason and Farrah flashed grins at each other and leapt from Onslow’s protective shell, shadows taking the form of black flying motorcycles under them and hauling away through the air. Jason’s shadow cloak trailed behind him and Farrah conjured her fire wings that did the same.

“Why are you riding off on vehicles?” Neil asked through voice chat. “You can both fly.”

“Because it’s more metal,” Jason said.

“Shade made those vehicles out of shadow-stuff,” Neil said. “There isn’t any metal.”

“I was thinking that perhaps we should devise a plan before rushing off,” Humphrey suggested. Taika, one of the few people that towered over Humphrey, put a meat slab hand on his shoulder.

“The music’s playing, bro. Time to rock and roll.”

Taika also leapt from the safety of Onslow’s shell. He transformed into a giant golden bird and rocketed after Jason and Farrah, swiftly gaining on them.

“This is music?” Humphrey asked. “The guy just asked if he was evil, then said that he was!”

“I like it,” Sophie said, then kissed him gently on the cheek. “See you out there.”

In a blur, she was also gone.

“Does no one see the value in making a plan?” Humphrey asked. Rufus put a hand on Humphrey’s shoulder, just like Taika had.

“Plans are great,” Rufus told him. “But sometimes there’s a giant explosion and you just have to go out and fight. Take it from a guy who failed as a team leader: it’s not always

about having a clever plan. Sometimes it's about getting out of your own way and trusting your amazing teammates to be amazing.”

Humphrey sighed.

“Alright,” he said. “Onslow, speed us up if you please.”

Onslow accelerated the pace of his shell, propelling it closer to the dust cloud.

“I still say this isn't music,” Humphrey muttered.

“What is that noise?” Korinne asked. “Is it some kind of sound attack?”

“I think it's music,” Zara said.

“If someone is using a song essence aura to produce that,” Korinne said, “I'm worried about the state of their mind.”

“I believe it is Jason Asano,” Orin offered. “I have heard this sound when I met with my uncle in the training room in Asano's vehicle.”

“Why is he projecting it now?” Korinne asked.

“I don't know,” Zara said, “but I think I like it. It makes me want to hit things.”

“Good,” Korinne said. “We've got no shortage of things to hit.”

The other two elemental messenger variants didn't have flames for hair or parts of their bodies glowing magma, but they were no less a departure from the messengers the group had seen in the past. Those with an affinity to ash retained the shape of normal messengers but were entirely white-grey as if coated in chalk. Ash swirled around them and they fired off rough white orbs that exploded into clouds of obscuring ash and burning cinders. The last variant had affinities for earth and metal, looking like mosaic statues made from shards of stone and different coloured metals.

Jason and Farrah were the vanguard as they headed for the cloud, now close enough to cover the sky. They did not remain in the lead, however, with Taika and Sophie blazing past them as more messengers emerged from the cloud to meet them. Taika, in the form of a giant golden eagle, was the first to strike, crashing into one of the metal and earth messengers.

Ability: [Momentous Charge] (Swift)

- Special attack (movement, combination).
- Cost: High mana and stamina.
- Cooldown: Four minutes.

- Current rank: Silver 0 (01%).

- Effect (iron): Charge attack. Rapidly gain [Momentum] during the charge. Can culminate in a non-combination special attack.
 - Effect (bronze): Can cover extreme distances and move through the air. The speed of the charge escalates over the duration of the charge.
 - Effect (silver): The damage from [Momentum] is enhanced by your speed at the moment the attack lands.
 - [Momentum] (boon, magic, stacking): When making an attack, all instances are consumed to inflict resonating-force damage. Multiple instances can be accumulated and instances are lost quickly while not moving.
-

Taika's first battle as a silver-ranker had been an awkward fight in the corridors of Jason's cloud palace. It was a situation that did not allow Taika to fully express his power set that excelled with wide open spaces and the chance to make long, charging attacks. His Momentous Charge had been accumulating power from the moment he had left Onslow's shell, unleashing it as he struck. He didn't peck with his eagle's beak or claw with his talons, instead ramming his head into the messenger, maximising the raw physical impact. Chunks of stone and fragments of metal burst off it like a sculpture struck by a cannon.

Ability: [Unstoppable Strike] (Swift)

- Special attack (movement).
 - Cost: Moderate mana and stamina.
 - Cooldown: One minute.
 - Current rank: Silver 0 (01%).
 - Effect (iron): Melee attack. If any instances of [Momentum] are triggered by the attack, they deal an amount of disruptive-force equal to the resonating-force damage.
 - Effect (bronze): When combined with a movement-combination special attack, the physical momentum of that attack is extremely hard to impede. Physical barriers and constraints are struck with resonating-force damage. Magical barriers and constraints are struck with disruptive-force damage. Resistances to any effect that impedes motion are significantly increased for the duration of the combination attack.
 - Effect (silver): The cooldown of this ability is reset when using a movement-combination special attack, allowing this ability to be combined with that attack.
-

The combination of powers, used under optimal conditions, made a wreck of Taika's target. Even so, no silver-rank being was easy to kill and the elemental powers of earth and metal reinforced the messenger all the more.

Taika did not stick around to finish the job, despite the messenger's condition. While he shared Humphrey's qualities of power, mobility and strength, their roles were similar but not the same. Humphrey was a brawler, using speed, power and toughness to make life hard for his enemies. His ability to keep up with enemies and sustain brutal levels of attack power made him an unrelenting opponent that often secured kills for the team. Taika was an initiator, using overwhelming speed and incredible burst damage to put enemies on the back foot. He was heavy cavalry, except giant and a bird.

Taika didn't have Humphrey's sustained damage, so he roared off in another charge attack as Humphrey teleported in to finish the severely damaged messenger. This new charge attack did not accelerate over time until it rivalled Sophie's pace, but it still let him move faster than anyone but her.

Ability: [Speed and Power] (Swift)

- Special attack (movement, combination).
 - Cost: Low mana and stamina.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Silver 0 (02%).

 - Effect (iron): Melee attack. Gains an instance of the [Relentless Attack] boon.

 - Effect (bronze): When instances of [Relentless Attack] are consumed, gain that many instances of [Momentum].

 - Effect (silver): May be used as a charge attack by increasing the mana and stamina cost to moderate, granting additional speed for the duration of the attack. Speed increase enhances flight more than ground speed. When combined with a non-combination special attack, a number of instances of [Relentless Attack] are immediately generated based on the damage dealt. Using this ability multiple times in succession progressively increases the mana and stamina cost.

 - [Relentless Attack] (boon, magic, stacking): Consume all instances of this boon to reduce the cooldown of a special attack. The cooldown reduction has an increased effect on movement special attacks.

 - [Momentum] (boon, magic, stacking): When making an attack, all instances are consumed to inflict resonating-force damage. Multiple instances can be accumulated and instances are lost quickly while not moving.
-

Taika's first charge attack had landed him amongst the enemy, so there were plenty around as he made his second. This gave him the chance to use an aspect of his shape-changing power as he flew to the next target, gathering air around his wings and shooting it off in bolts of compressed air. The damage was far from exceptional but the bolts exploded on impact, sending messengers scattering. As a result, they had trouble forming up to meet the team following in Taika's wake.

Ability: [Block Out the Sun] (Wing)

- Special ability (shape-change).
- Cost: High mana and stamina.
- Cooldown: Four minutes.

- Current rank: Silver 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Bird form with high speed.

- Effect (bronze): Giant bird form with high speed.

- Effect (silver): Gather wind energy while moving. That wind can be used to make compressed air attacks. These attacks do not interrupt any movement special attacks in progress.

Taika's Unstoppable Strike power had its cooldown reset by being combined with his first charge ability, making it available to combine with his second. Taika struck the next earth-type messenger like a missile, smashing off chunks. The second charge power also generated the Relentless Attack buff, which Taika immediately consumed to reset the first charge power. As combining Unstoppable Strike again had let it reset its own cooldown, Taika once more launched the combination of charge power and special attack at the next target.

By this time, the team had engaged with the messengers that Taika's opening moves had placed firmly on the defensive. Sophie was barely visible flickering between the messengers at a pace that made even Taika look slow. Where Humphrey was following up on Taika's big hits, she was following up on his air bursts, keeping the messengers from achieving any group cohesion.

The team, by comparison, were falling into easy synergies. Humphrey finished off the earth-type defenders Taika had already hammered, exposing the less-sturdy fire, magma and ash types. The fire and magma types output the most destructiveness, largely countered by Neil's timely shields and Farrah intercepting attacks. Farrah didn't just block the flames and magma but absorbed them, refilling the mana spent on costly attacks.

Farrah's blasted her Lava Cannon and Obsidian Shard Storm abilities at the ash-type messengers who were trying to impede the team with clouds of ash and burning cinders. These were being quickly dispersed by Sophie's wind, Farrah's flames and Belinda, copying and locking the messenger's powers from the safety of Onslow's shell.

Rufus, despite the inability to fly, was harassing the fire and magma messengers in the backline. Clive opened a portal for him and from there he used the messengers themselves as platforms, showing off the agility he had been trained in from birth. His short-distance teleport powers, Flash Step and Flash of Moonlight, allowed him to move from foe to foe, leaving behind savage sword wounds before moving on.

With his flashy sun powers, Rufus was the light to Jason's shadow, both men moving from enemy to enemy. Already, butterflies glowing orange and blue were emerging from several messengers, seeking out more victims upon which to spread afflictions.

"See?" Rufus asked Humphrey through voice chat as the group dominated the messengers. "Sometimes you just have to trust the ability of your team."

"I still say this 'music' isn't necessary," Humphrey grumbled as Gary dropped past him, legs wrapped around a messenger. The huge leonid, covered in heavy armour was plunging through the sky, hammering the messenger with a short-handled mallet.

"Did anyone tell Gary he can't fly?" Neil asked, watching from Onslow's shell. "I think he's hitting it in time with the beat."

Chapter 720

A More Practical Purpose

The mushroom cloud of dust and ash covered a huge area, and all around it, teams of adventurers were clashing with the messengers altered by elemental power. One of the first things Jason had done on coming into contact with one was to touch his hand to it briefly.

Converted Messenger (ash, silver rank)

- Messenger abilities suppressed.
- Able to conjure ash bombs.

The elemental messengers were noticeably weaker than the regular variety, most evident in their lack of aura control. Instead of the usual precise and oppressive force, their auras lashed out in waves of suppressive power, strong but inconsistent. Any well-trained adventurer could handle the intermittent spiritual attacks, fending off what was normally a messenger's strongest weapon.

They were also lacking in intellect; reduced to animalistic instincts. They understood enough to work in tandem, but failed to move beyond placing the strong ones at the front and the destructive ones at the rear. They failed to adapt to any strategy but the most obvious, allowing the adventurers to get the upper hand.

On the ground, Clive and Farrah were standing at the edge of a circle of scorched earth. The blast that created the mushroom cloud had levelled a huge area of rainforest and Farrah had burned away the felled trees and crushed undergrowth to create a space for Clive to work. He drew a cubic ritual diagram from sparkling golden light, a box comprised of framework lines and floating sigils.

As he worked, a stray gobbet of magma the size of a motorcycle plunged through the air towards the cube. A stream of blue and orange light shot in from the side and transformed into Jason's familiar, Gordon. One of the orbs floating around Gordon turned into a shield and intercepted the attack.

"Thank you, Gordon," Farrah called up at him. He responded with a complex strobing of his orbs before turning back into a light stream and flashing away.

"Do have any idea what that flashy-light language means?" Farrah asked Clive. "I have a translation power, now, and I'm getting nothing."

"I also have a translation power, and I have no idea. Do you think Jason is just pretending to understand it?"

"No," Farrah said. "He'd do that to us, but he wouldn't do it to Gordon."

After completing the diagram, Clive chanted a brief incantation. Flames ran across the lines of the box for a moment before sputtering out almost immediately. He and Farrah walked around the cube that was twice as tall as they were, looking it over.

"Seems sound, Farrah said.

"Give it a test?" Clive suggested.

Farrah cast her Fire Bolt spell and the box absorbed it, much like she had the powers of the fire messengers. The flames were dispersed across the lines and sigils before being drawn in and vanishing. Farrah pointed out a section where the golden lines had dimmed noticeably as they drew in the fire.

"You might want to touch that up," she said.

"I saw it," Clive agreed. He redrew the section and repeated the incantation. Another test showed that the weak area had been repaired.

"Do we do a proper field test of this one first?" Farrah asked, "or go straight to the other three."

"Let's field test," Clive said. "It should be able to hold one."

They looked up at the sky where messengers and adventurers still clashed in the air. They both had sufficiently acute vision to pick out the distant figures, at least those close enough to not be entirely obscured by dust. Farrah pointed, using her aura to guide Clive's eyes.

"That one."

"Okay," Clive said.

Farrah moved into the cube, the golden lines tingling her body as they passed through her and strobing for a moment once they had. She stood in the middle of the cube, looking up. Clive pointed one arm at her and another to the sky and then incanted a spell.

"Exchange your fates."

Farrah vanished and was replaced with a fire-type messenger, while she appeared in his place up in the sky. Now at the back of a messenger formation, she opened up on them with her strongest attacks. Down below, the flame messenger was barely phased by the abrupt translocation, firing a blast of flame from its hands almost immediately.

Clive raised an eyebrow as fire struck the edge of the box. Instead of passing through the open space between the lines of the magical cage, the flames were contained by an invisible barrier. The fire messenger charged forward, bouncing off the same barrier.

“Adequate,” Clive assessed, then proceeded to draw a second cube next to the first.

“That’s a lot of butterflies,” Jason said as he floated in the air, looking at a wall of blue and orange. The butterflies were so thick that they were obscuring the messengers behind them. Many of the butterflies were destroyed by attacks from the messengers, exploding in colourful blasts of disruptive-force energy. The gaps were swiftly filled as more butterflies spawned from the already-afflicted messengers.

“Is there some kind of limit on how many butterflies you can have?” Taika asked. He was back in his human form but had a pair of golden wings holding him aloft.

“Not numerically,” Jason explained. “They aren’t actual living things; they’re energy constructs that look and behave somewhat like butterflies. They come from an affliction that Gordon’s orbs can inflict. The affliction continually takes tiny bits of mana from the target and turns them into the butterflies. The butterflies carry all the afflictions of the person they were created from, including the one that creates more butterflies. If the butterflies can find an enemy before the bit of mana they’re made of runs out, they dump all the afflictions on the fresh victim. If not, they peter out.”

“Bro, I don’t want to sound like I’m on the other team, here, but I think it sounds better when you call them enemies, not victims. Otherwise, it sounds like you’re rounding them up to do experiments on.”

Jason pointedly avoided looking down towards what Clive was doing.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he said slightly too casually.

“How do the butterflies know who’s an enemy?” Taika asked.

“You know, I have a few powers that only affect enemies, or affect them differently from allies. I’ve never figured out to my satisfaction how they tell the difference. It almost has to be some kind of aura interaction, but that raises a lot of questions. As a test, I’ve tried forcing myself to think of something as an enemy when it, strictly speaking, was not.”

“Some *thing*, not someone?”

“I thought it would be best to try it on the most disdainful, despicable thing I could conceive of, to make it easier to think of as an enemy, even though it technically wasn’t.”

“What did you go with?”

“Frozen meals for one.”

“You might want to try it on a person, bro.”

“That never seemed very ethical.”

“That’s a good point; the whole victims-versus-enemies thing. You know, you could probably wipe out a whole city with those butterflies. If the city was full of your enemies.”

“Being in a city full of enemies is something I’ll generally try to avoid.”

“You say that bro, but we all know what you’re like. It’ll probably happen and it’ll probably be your fault.”

“You think there’s a city full of people that hate me that much?”

“Bro, you blasted Metallica over the battlefield. I bet you freaked a lot of people out.”

“That does not warrant a city full of mortal foes.”

“Also, I don’t think you picked the right song to start with. It was okay, but I would have opened with *Master of Puppets* or *Trapped Under Ice*. Or maybe mix it up with some AC/DC. *Thunderstruck* would be awesome to have a fight to.”

“I’m waiting to fight someone with lightning powers to use that one.”

“Bro, if the bloke you’re fighting is the one with the lightning powers, wouldn’t *Thunderstruck* be you putting on a soundtrack for the other guy to kick the crap out of you instead of the other way around?”

“Huh,” Jason mused. “You might be right.”

“You should put it on now and we’ll go find some more bad guys.”

“No, most of the remaining messengers are all staying in the cloud. They’re aggressive but not completely unintelligent, and they’ve seen how badly they’re losing against the adventurers.”

“You can sense around the whole cloud?”

“Yeah. Hasn’t your perception started filtering the sensations to get a better handle on the situation?”

“Nah, bro. That sounds like some next-level stuff.”

“Well, you’re silver-rank now; welcome to the next level. Do some meditation practise and see how it goes.”

“Bro, I’m flying in the air and we’re still in a battle.”

“Think of it like spiritual resistance training. I’ll be your spotter.”

Taika’s expression turned thoughtful.

“Like doing bench presses with your soul.”

“Exactly,” Jason said. “Which leads me to one question: do you even lift, bro?”

“Bro, that’s ice cold. Okay, let’s do this.”

They flew over to Onslow’s shell and Taika sat cross-legged atop it, eyes closed. Jason stood watching over him for a moment, then some cloud material spilled out from the shrunken cloud flask hanging around his neck. It formed a chair for Jason to settle into, eating a sandwich and leafing through a book as he watched over Taika.

Rufus teleported onto the shell in a flash of silvery moonlight.

“What are you doing?” he asked Jason.

“It’s meditation training,” Jason said.

Rufus’ eyes rested on the sandwich.

“Yes, it looks like you’re engrossed in contemplating the mysteries of the cosmos.”

Jason gently waved the book in his hand.

“This is astral magic theory, so technically, I am. And the bad guys are pretty much done for; we’re just letting the familiars get some practise in before the butterflies finish all the stragglers.”

As Jason suggested, Gordon was floating around with Belinda’s lantern familiar, shooting beams and bolts of force at messengers rapidly rotting away under the weight of Jason’s afflictions. Stash was also present, in the form of what looked to Jason like a woodpecker the size of a bulldozer. He hovered in place, wings buzzing like a hummingbird as his beak pounded at an earth-type messenger like a jackhammer. He quickly gave up on that approach, however, spitting out gobbets of rot caused by the afflictions.

“You could just join Taika,” Jason suggested to Rufus.

“It does seem like it would be good perception training, trying to push your senses through all this obstruction,” Rufus acknowledged. He was moving to sit down when Jason stood up suddenly, the cloud chair returning to the flask as he put away the book.

“What is it?” Rufus asked.

“The fight just finished,” Jason said.

“What do you mean?” Rufus asked, then turned his head as he sensed what Jason already had: two diamond-rank auras moving through the air at blinding speed.

Charist and Allayeth had arrived from Yaresh, Charist flying superhero style while Allayeth sat in what looked like a throne made from glittering lights. They slowed down and split up as they approached the massive cloud. Charist gained altitude and vanished into the murk as Allayeth descended, making her way to one of the gold-rank adventurers for a quick discussion.

“We should regroup,” Humphrey announced through voice chat. “How are things on the ground, Clive?”

“We’re more or less at capacity here,” Clive said.

“Very well, we’ll converge on you. Jason, it might be time for you to take in that...”

He paused before reluctantly finishing.

“...‘music’ device.”

“Bro,” Taika said as he got to his feet. “I think Humphrey might like old man music. Do you have any Foster and Allen?”

“No,” Jason said. “I do have some young people music made so long ago that the people who made it are old now. Do you think he’d like the Hollies?”

“If he doesn’t,” Farrah said, “I’m not sure he’s on the right team.”

“You don’t get to say that,” Humphrey told her. “You’re not even on this team.”

“She’s right about the Hollies, though,” Sophie said.

“Do you even know who that is?” Humphrey asked.

“Humpy, Jason and Farrah brought back a whole different world worth of music. Have you not listened to any of it?”

There was resounding silence in the voice chat until finally, Gary spoke up, his voice trepidatious.

“Did you just call him Humpy?”

“No,” Sophie said, uncharacteristically flustered.

“No!” Humphrey said, just as fast.

Everyone fell silent again, each person connected to the voice chat almost hearing Humphrey’s sweat as they waited for Jason to voice an opinion of Humphrey’s new nickname.

“Well, I think it’s sweet they’re becoming more comfortable as a couple,” Jason said. “Gary, where are you?”

“I’m riding to the ground by holding onto a messenger. I’ve left his wings alone so he can fly but I’m too heavy in my armour and we’re descending steadily. I figured out that if you hold one leg and one arm, you can kind of steer them.”

“Isn’t the messenger attacking you?” Humphrey asked, eagerly jumping into Jason’s merciful change of subject.

“Yeah, but it’s one of the fire ones,” Gary said. “It’s not accomplishing much. The heat’s making my undies a little swampy.”

As they chatted, Jason, Taika and Rufus moved from atop Onslow’s shell to the inside with Neil and Belinda as it descended towards the ground. The sound projector floated down and into the shell as well, as directed by a control device Jason took out. He waited for the last song to finish before removing the recording crystal and turning it off, however.

They reached the ground and disembarked from Onslow’s shell, which shrank down to encase the familiar who resumed his normal tortoise form. Clive and Farrah were

standing by what were now four cubic cages, set out in a square. Each one was crowded with around a dozen messengers, each cube holding a different type, trapped and alive.

“That seems to have gone well,” Jason said.

“You weren’t the one who had to keep going in to be switch-teleported,” Farrah complained. “It got very unpleasant as they filled up.”

Jason turned his head as he felt Allayeth attention fall on them. A few seconds later she arrived in a blur of her sparkling throne. She stepped off of it and took a small bottle from a dimensional pouch at her waist. She unstopped it and the cloud of lights was drawn in, after which she sealed the bottle and put it away.

“What do you have here?” she asked, looking over the arrangement of prison cubes.

“It’s a prison array,” Farrah explained. “It cyclically employs the elemental energy of the prisoners to reinforce the array. The prisoners themselves fuel their imprisonment through an energy drain that keeps them from having the power to break out. It only works because there are distinct elemental forces with uniform subsets that we can use to cycle the energy. You can’t suppress elemental power with the same element.”

“And you just happened to have a ritual array for exactly that?”

“Farrah is the array specialist,” Clive said. “I just helped tweak the specifics.”

“Meaning that I had an idea and Clive figured out how to make it work in about four minutes by himself instead of four weeks with a research team,” Farrah classified.

“Interesting,” Allayeth said. “We should leave that discussion for now, however. Jason, I understand you have some kind of sound projector?”

“Yep. You want to make a request?”

“Tina Turner,” Farrah suggested. “You don’t know musicians from Jason’s world, so just trust me.”

“Thank you,” Allayeth said, “but I had a more practical purpose in mind.”

Allayeth took a recording crystal from Jason, made an announcement into it and then placed it into the projector and tossed it into the air. Her voice spread out, warning the adventurers to move away from the cloud.

Shortly after the announcement began repeating on a loop, a vast force of elemental wind appeared to everyone’s senses, high in the sky. A massive vortex had formed and was drawing in the cloud, sucking it high into the sky. The adventurers who had been moving away from the cloud started moving faster, but a few were still sucked up with the cloud. Allayeth tilted her head back, sighing as she looked at the vortex, barely visibly beyond the chaotically swirling cloud.

“He could have waited a little bit,” she said. “No patience, that man.”

“Out of curiosity,” Jason asked, “how would you have warned everyone if you didn't have my sound projector?”

“I wouldn't.”

“Okay,” Jason said. “And now I know you a little better.”

“Are you suggesting that I'm callous?”

“Definitely not,” Jason said firmly.

“Good.”

“Because I don't want to get sucked into a wind vortex like the sound projector you borrowed,” he mumbled.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.”

“It didn't sound like nothing.”

“Oh look: there's a gold-ranker flying over here. He probably needs to talk to you about something very important.”