

Chapter 81: Crazy Desperation Move

Jason looked around and saw that multiple sand skimmers were converging on the three occupied by his group. Compared to their own skimmers, the ones pursuing them were made for passengers rather than cargo, with extra seats and awnings to shield them from the sun. Jason grinned, knowing they were about to pay for the comfort the shade offered them. The other skimmers were also faster, not weighed down by shipments of coin.

"I can't feel their auras at this distance," Jason called out. He had to speak loudly over the air rushing through the propulsion ring of the skimmer."

"Me either," Humphrey said.

Gabrielle, in the seat next to Humphrey, stood up. The speed of the skimmer didn't seem to bother her as she stood solid as a rock, head swivelling around.

"Eight enemy skimmers," she said. "Each one has seven or eight people, most of which have at least one essence, with either one or two iron rankers per skimmer. No bronze rankers."

The team's skimmers were running side-by-side, while the enemy skimmers were closing in on the back and side of their formation.

"Which one do you want?" Jason asked Humphrey.

Humphrey pointed out the pair of skimmers behind them.

"Stash and I will take one each," he said.

"I'll take the two coming in on our left then," Jason called out.

"Can you get over to them?" Humphrey asked.

"No worries," Jason said as his cloak appeared around his body. Then the cloak was empty as Jason appeared under the shade awning of one of the skimmers, where he got his first good look at the pirates. They were human, ethnically distinct from the humans that dominated Greenstone. These looked, to Jason's eyes, more like African natives, with darker skin and wild shocks of curly hair.

Jason's sudden appearance in their midst startled the passengers of the enemy skimmer. Before they could react, Jason pushed back the protective sheath on a razor tied to the inside of his forearm. He sliced the back of his hand with it and aimed the shallow cut at the pirates. Leeches sprayed from the wound, scattering over the pirates closely packed together on the skimmer. They immediately went wild with panic.

The driver hadn't seen Jason's appearance, only hearing his fellows react before feeling a couple of leeches latch onto his skull. This prompted the wild swerving that was noticed by the other nearby skimmer, which moved closer to investigate.

As sand pirates screamed panic around him, clutching at the leeches crawling onto them, Jason steadied himself by gripping one of the poles that held up the awning. With his other hand he took out one of his bandolier darts; one with a red cord grip. He saw the second skimmer closing in and tried to gauge its pace as it moved over the sand. Conveniently, it was approaching in a straight line.

Jason threw the dart, which struck the sand right in front of the skimmer. It sailed over the dart, which exploded underneath it. There wasn't enough force to do more than superficial damage, but it pushed up the skimmer's back end, tipping the front end down in turn. The front of the skimmer dug into the sand, but the skimmer's speed didn't halt the momentum. The skimmer flipped over, flying through the air before landing upside down.

Jason own skimmer was slowing down as the driver focused on removing leeches from his head and back. Jason used the leaping power of his boots to jump out as his cloak manifested around him. He drifted gently down to the sand. He glanced over at the skimmer haphazardly moving away from him, confident that Team Colin could handle a few sand pirates.

He turned his attention to the flipped-over skimmer. The poles that held up the awning were never designed to hold the skimmer's weight and collapsed. The propulsion ring had warped and was no longer blowing out air, but it maintained enough integrity to prop the skimmer up at an angle.

Some of the pirates had been tossed free as the skimmer flipped, and he could see others struggling to crawl out from under it. Jason drew his dagger and moved in to finish them before they recovered.

When Jason teleported away from his team's skimmer, Humphrey stood up, Stash the lizard tucked into one arm. He pointed at one of the skimmers behind them.

"Drop," he commanded, then threw the lizard high into the air. Stash turned into a small bird, fluttering in the direction Humphrey had pointed. As the skimmer passed under it, Stash turned from a bird into an enormous sand shab, as large as the skimmer itself.

Under the shade awning, the sand pirates didn't see the tiny bird transform into a monster that crashed down on them. They were just pressed into the bottom of the skimmer by a massive, unknown weight. The skimmer itself was built for speed rather than heavy cargo, and the magic holding it aloft was overcome. It splashed into the sand,

landing flat and heavy so it didn't flip. The propulsion ring whining loudly before cutting out as the skimmer came to an abrupt stop. Stash sat on top of it, his crustacean legs squatting over the sides.

The moment he had released Stash into the air, Humphrey turned to Gabrielle.

“Protect the skimmer?” he asked.

She nodded and he teleported away. Instead of putting himself onto a skimmer like Jason, he appeared directly in front of one. He stared at the driver, who glared back and aimed the skimmer right for him.

Humphrey's huge, wing-shaped sword appeared in his hands. Its length was the equal of Humphrey's considerable height and his feet dug into the sand as he braced to swing its enormous weight. He gathered the power within himself, ready to unleash his strongest special attack. As the skimmer came upon him at speed, he made a huge overhead swing, bringing the blade crashing down.

The sword smashed through the awning, through the driver, through two of the pirates behind the driver, through the base of the skimmer and buried itself in the sand. The skimmer stopped dead, the front half split down the middle and jammed into the ground with the sword. The propulsion ring cut out and the passengers, dead or alive, were tossed forward by momentum, sailing past Humphrey to be dumped in the sand.

The sword was buried to the hilt in sand, so Humphrey let the magically-constructed object disappear. He conjured a new sword into his right hand, this one much smaller. Like his larger sword, it was highly stylised, but instead of a dragon's wing, it looked like that of an angel, the blade assembled from feathers of razor-edged silver and gold. He levelled it at the pirates, groaning where they had fallen in the sand. From their dark skin and wild hair, he could see they were northerners, so he spoke to them in their language.

“I am now accepting surrender.”

The team regrouped after all eight of the attacking skimmers were destroyed. Humphrey and Jason took out two each on their side, while on the other, the bronze rank Ernest had dealt with three. The final pirate skimmer had an encounter with Mose's fire vortex bomb, being reduced to a shattered wreck of warped metal.

Jason stood over the bodies of the men he had killed, looking grimly down at them. Sparring with Humphrey and Rufus had given him an inflated opinion of average skill levels, and finishing the pirates who survived the crash had been contemptuously easy. Too easy, for taking a life. He tapped a boot to one of them.

➤ [Ustei Raider] has no loot.

He made his way to where the other skimmer had drifted to a stop. The pirates were all dead, courtesy of Colin. Where the corpses weren't pale and drained, they were blackened with rot. He cut his hand with the forearm razor, holding it out for the leeches to return. The cut quickly closed afterwards, as if it had never been there at all.

The cargo skimmers turned back to pick up Jason, Humphrey and Ernest, who had all left the skimmers to fight. Humphrey was the last to be picked up, waiting next to the ruins of a skimmer with four prisoners on their knees in front of him.

Jason and Gabrielle hopped off the skimmer as it pulled to a stop. Gabrielle moved to Humphrey's side, while Jason examined the wreckage of the pirate skimmer. He could see it had been split down the middle and driven into the ground with a single, ludicrous blow.

"What did this?" he asked.

"Special attack," Humphrey said. "It's called unstoppable force."

"I can see why," Jason said.

Another skimmer arrived, Ernest and Phoebe stepping off to join the others.

"Did you get anything out of them?" Ernest asked, nodding at the pirates.

"They're all northerners," Humphrey said. "Ustei Tribe nomads, from the hair and clothes. I have no idea what they're doing this far south, and they aren't talking."

"Why would they attack a spirit coin convoy?" Phoebe asked. "If they knew enough to intercept it, then they had to know it would be covered in adventurers. That's a crazy desperation move."

The four prisoners knelt in the hot sand, glaring up at their captors.

"Do they look like beaten men to you?" Ernest asked.

"No," Phoebe said.

"Could be just courage," Ernest said, "but maybe take a look around, Humphrey."

Humphrey nodded, vanishing as he teleported high into the air. Dragons wings appeared on his back, holding him aloft as he looked around. From this high, he could see the city and the green of the delta. In the other direction, some of the spirit coin farms. Closer, he saw something moving over the sand. At first glance, he thought it was an enormous monster with three heads, but he realised it was some kind of highly-stylised vehicle. Too big for any monster lower than silver rank, there was a rigidity to its motion. It moved smoothly over the sand, like a humungous sand skimmer. He let himself drop, using his wings to slow down as he neared the ground.

“Anything?” Ernest asked.

“Sand barge,” Humphrey said. “Very big. We should get ready for another fight.”