

Chapter 843

A Better Adventurer

The root avatar had not gone down easily but Gary had kept it largely contained. Once it was dead, the adventurers started destroying more crystals and the elemental messengers became even more dangerous. Clive was sent away when the expectations for another special enemy grew.

Clive and Onslow were amongst the last silver-rankers to evacuate, with only Jason staying longer. Clive had convinced Miriam to let them stay and continue to serve as a rest and recovery station. Miriam kept Onslow well behind the front line as, even when reinforced by Clive's rituals, Onslow's formidable shell was not indestructible. Once the elemental messengers were firmly into gold-rank power levels, Miriam started ordering the less powerful gold-rankers to evacuate. Clive and Onslow withdrew with the first wave of them, carrying many to the evacuation point.

The evacuation sites were comprised of ritual circles in a line that headed directly away from the tree. Going over the circles in sequences granted a stacking movement buff that was equally applicable to individuals, vehicles and familiars like Onslow.

Onslow's shell drifted over the first in the sequence of ritual circles and immediately started accelerating. Inside, Clive and Mini Onslow were seated on a heavily padded couch. The momentum increased with each circle until they were pushed deep into the cushions. Clive groaned as Onslow threw his little hands in the air, letting out a chirping laugh like a child on a rollercoaster.

Regrouping sites were set up at the points where the movement boosts ran out. They were sufficiently clear of the battle zone that even gold-ranks would take time to reach them. Onslow arrived in a pleasant grassy zone, one of the more common terrains amongst the territories. Several adventurers were portalling others back to the main base, but many had sat right down in the grass and started meditating.

The transformation zone had been a massive boon to the silver-rankers whose advancement had stalled following the monster surge. Most had taken between two to four years to go all the way through bronze-rank to silver and found the subsequent slowdown frustrating. The early stages of silver hadn't been bad, especially when so many ranked up during the surge. The infamous wall at the fourth stage of silver-rank was a stark change as advancement slowed to a crawl.

The transformation zone had proven a salve to frustrated silver-rankers. As the living anomalies had become more challenging, advancement started picking up. It wasn't a

match for pre-silver levels, but adventurers were finally reaching the fifth and sixth thresholds of their essence abilities. Coming less than a year after ranking up, those were impressive gains when a decade was considered a lightning-fast rise from silver to gold.

The adventurers came to a very adventurer-like conclusion: that for all its weirdness and danger the transformation zone was a rare and precious opportunity. That had led to renewed frustration when Miriam benched them all after judging the anomalies as too dangerous. Now they had finally leapt back into the fight, many were eager to consolidate their gains, meditating as soon as they hit the safe zone.

It didn't take long for Clive's team to find him and Clive set up different décor inside of Onslow. The plain wooden tables and chairs used for the mobile clinic went into Clive's storage space. Only the couch was left out and it was soon joined by more soft and luxurious furniture. The team had developed a taste for large and plush furniture from living in a cloud house.

The team, minus Jason, climbed into Onslow's shell, once again set up with open sides. They started heading out overland, despite the portal and teleport powers they had access to. They weren't in a rush and didn't want those powers on cooldown; they wanted them available to move far and fast if needed. The team settled in before turning to Humphrey as he let out an unhappy sigh.

"It wasn't that long ago that I was lecturing Jason about leaving us out of things," he said. Sophie leaned into him, worming her fingers between his and giving his hand a squeeze.

"Teamwork is good," she said. "But sometimes what you want has to give way to what's best. Jason needs to be there but we can't help him now. If we were there, the only thing we could do would be give him another thing to worry about."

"She's right," Clive said. "Miriam was starting to move back the gold-rankers, let alone me. She wouldn't let you anywhere near the battle. Once whatever comes out of that thing next is dealt with, it will probably be Gary doing the fighting alone. Everyone else will either be sent back or hide with Jason in an invisibility ball."

"I just wish we could do more," Humphrey said.

"We can," Rufus told him. "We can get stronger."

Rufus left his armchair and took a meditative pose on the floor.

"And this is why I'm a better adventurer than you," Neil said, drawing all eyes.

"Really?" Belinda asked.

"Yes," Neil said. "I'm going to meditate too, but I'm staying in this comfy chair to do it."

Belinda looked from Neil to Rufus, then back to Neil before finally settling her gaze on Rufus.

“He’s right,” she said. “He is a better adventurer than you.”

The root avatar had been hard to kill but ultimately not that much of a threat. With Gary onside, they had an invincible weapon against any individual combatant. The root avatar was powerful but Gary had chained it down and beaten it to death. The largest problem it presented was tying up Gary, leaving him unable to aid the other adventurers. With the elemental messengers growing stronger with every smashed crystal, that was an increasing problem.

Once the root avatar was down, Miriam prepared for the next escalation. She didn’t like having Jason stay but he insisted his presence was necessary. She didn’t think it was just stubbornness or bravado, so she arranged the best protection she could manage. She had Ramona, the shield specialist from her team, create an invisibility sphere in the air. It held her, Jason and the healers who weren’t combat specialists, Hana Shavar and Carlos Quilido.

The weather machine had proven increasingly useful over the course of the battle. It took time to make changes to the weather and its targeting was not precise, but that became less of a concern as more and more allies evacuated the field. Fire tornados sucked in messengers as adventurers herded their enemies into range. When one wave of messengers had been almost entirely fire and magma types, gold-rank monsoon rain had severely dampened their powers.

Being babysat by gold-rankers, Jason had little to do but consider the potential threats ahead. It seemed obvious at this stage that there would be more singular threats like to root avatar and he considered the possibilities. The first major threat had been a copy of the now-dead avatar of Undeath. Would further copies replicate other powerful combatants that had appeared in the zone? Would the end fight be Gary vs Tree Gary?

Two other things were playing on Jason’s mind. One was that Jason himself had undeniably imprinted on the transformation zone. He was too weak to be an end boss, but would the tree start producing versions of him instead of messengers? An army of affliction-wielding, life-draining root monsters? The area around the tree was already carpeted in the dead, with elemental messengers piled up on the ground.

The other concern Jason had related to the tree itself. Aside from the crystals set into it, the tree had proved impervious to any form of damage, even from Gary.

That level of imperviousness was rare and usually related to souls somehow. The tree was a corrupted soul forge, so that seemed possible according to Jason's admittedly limited knowledge. He intended to expand his understanding of soul engineering in the future, given how often it kept coming up.

He wondered if they were caught up in something like a messenger challenge power. When he had been in the past, that involved invulnerability to outside interference. That would make the key figuring out how to get past the invulnerability. The crystals embedded in the tree trunk were obviously part of it, but was there more to it than simply smashing all the crystals to expose the tree itself? With the transformation zone on the line, figuring out the rules was of critical importance.

Jason had managed to break the rules of a challenge power once before, but that had been against one silver-rank messenger. She was young, little more than a girl, and he had no illusions he could break whatever passed for a soul for the giant corrupted tree.

As they prepared to shatter more of the crystals, Miriam made sure that the other gold-rankers were ready to evacuate if necessary. The root avatar had appeared when a third of the crystals had been broken and they were about to reach the two-thirds mark.

She had already ordered some gold-rankers out of the fight. The healers were secure with Jason in case anyone needed drastic attention and others had already evacuated. She was ready to pull the rest at a moment's notice.

After the current wave of elemental messengers was cleared out, Miriam ordered Emir Bahadir to attack the crystals. His staff extended comically to strike them from a safe distance. The crystals were destroyed and, as anticipated, a fresh wave of enemies emerged.

Alongside the stronger elemental messengers, another towering figure stepped out of the tree, passing through the bark as if stepping through a waterfall. The giant was a replica of Gary, carved from dark wood. The head was carved into a fixed mask of Gary with blank-faced features. Instead of a mane, fire blazed yet did not scorch the wood.

The armour it wore and the hammer and shield it carried were an odd mix of iron, stone and packed earth. It was as if the material had been dug from the ground and pressed into the shape of Gary's armour. The same material comprised a replica of Gary's hammer and shield, both shrouded in orange flame.

Gary immediately clashed with his wooden doppelganger. The titanic clash between real and fake demigods filled the air with thunder as their strikes landed on one another. The adventurers were left to deal with the new messengers, once more having grown in

strength. Miriam was in the fray as well, working with her team. She kept an eye on the larger battle as they fought, her team periodically shielding her so she could stay watchful. She assessed the enemy and her own forces, planning out the next move.

It became quickly evident that while the wooden replica could copy Gary's form, his divine power was harder to reproduce. It would be another hard clash, but Miriam had no doubt that Gary would be the victor. For the rest of the battle, her assessment was less optimistic.

The elemental messengers were approaching the power level of the adventurers. For now, the adventurers remained superior, their versatility and intelligence trumping the mindless surge tactics of the messengers. The problem was one of numbers. For every wave that was struck down, another came out stronger.

The adventurers, by contrast, were too few. That hadn't mattered when the elemental messengers were weaker, but that was no longer the case. With enough power, quantity became a quality that the adventurers were struggling to overcome. Superior abilities and tactics were still working for now but it was becoming a losing battle. The gold-rankers were forming up, supporting each other as a rising tide of enemies washed around them. There was no battle line anymore, just an island in a sea of foes.

It was time to pull back while the adventurers held a thin advantage. If the messengers grew stronger, the withdrawal would get bloody in spite of gold-rank resilience. Miriam reached out to Jason through the command channel.

"I need a portal," she said.

"On it," came the succinct reply, which added to Miriam's worries. If even Jason Asano wasn't taking the time to talk nonsense, things might be even worse than she thought.

A portal to Jason's soul realm appeared, a ring floating in the air. It was well back, near the closest evacuation point. Miriam knew that Jason was worried about opening it too close to the tree, fearing potential negative reactions between the two powers. With the transformation zone already starting to break down, Miriam had agreed that they should keep destabilising influences to a minimum.

The gold-rankers started pulling back, fighting their way through the army of messengers surrounding them. That was when Miriam was faced with another unwelcome surprise. The messengers and the giants summoned by the tree had shown no indication of intelligence. They had demonstrated only blind aggression; moving forward and lashing out was their only tactic. They had likewise not reacted to the tactics of the adventurers, getting caught out again and again.

Then something changed. For the first time, the messengers shifted their approach as if they'd sensed the intention to withdraw. They started using their numbers to not just surround and attack the adventurers but to dogpile, regardless of how quickly it got them killed. They pressed in, body to body from every side; from above and below. The living were pressed in with the dead but it didn't matter. If a corpse fell out, there were countless more to take its place. The adventurers vanished into a rapidly growing mound of bodies, living and dead.

It was not a strategy that would have worked earlier. The messengers simply hadn't been strong enough to prevent the adventurers from tearing a hole through any barrier. Now, with enough numbers, the messengers were managing to contain them.

"Jason," Amos said through voice chat. "I need water. What we talked about."

"I'll see what I can do."

"Quickly, please."

Within the invisibility field, Jason opened another portal. This one wasn't to his soul realm but a normal shadow portal to the control room of the weather machine. Nik's head poked through a moment later.

"What do you need?" he asked.

"Water ball."

"Can do," Nik said. "You know, my head's feeling funny being hundreds of kilometres from my body."

"Then go back," Jason said. "I need that ball *now*."

"Sorry," Nik said and his head withdrew through the portal.

"Semi-portalling like that isn't good for you," Hana Shavar said. "I'm surprised he didn't throw up. I've seen people have seizures."

"He's good with dimensional forces," Jason said. "He gets it from me."

Nik's head popped back out.

"It should be starting now," he reported.

"Thanks," Jason told him. "Now, go back."

"Can't I stay and—"

"No," Jason said and pushed Nik's head back through, then closed the portal.

It was raining again, in as tightly concentrated an area as Nik could manage. The water was pooling into a giant ball as if collected in an invisible bowl, but that was beyond the scope of the weather machine's power. This was a power that belonged to Amos Pensinata. By the time the clouds emptied and the rain stopped, a massive sphere of

water was hanging in the air. Underneath it was the mound of messengers with the gold-rankers somewhere inside.

From the water orb, a massive tentacle swept out, grabbing at messengers and dragging them into the orb, leaving a huge gouge in the mound. More tentacles sprouted from the orb until there were ten, digging at the mound like a monster from the deep, trapped behind a watery portal.