

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.
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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."