

## Chapter 936

### Having Strangers Come Along

A line of red and gold electricity flashed through the air. It burst into the form of a Māori, right above the stone and lightning body of a stormspire drake. Koa dropped lightly onto the drake's back as it passed under him.

The drake half rolled back and forth trying to shake its rider. Whips of lightning lashed at Koa, only to vanish without visible effect. Unphased but not unbalanced, he crouched on the largest of the stones making up the drake's main body. He placed both hands on the rock he was kneeling on and the electricity holding the drake together started to dim.

The drake's thrashing grew worse, but Koa might as well have been glued to it. The rocks making up the front of the drake shifted, causing its neck to grow. Once it had extended enough, the drake twisted its head back to snap at Koa. Koa reached out, catching its nose in the palm of his hand. The electricity connecting the rocks in the drake's head and neck vanished and fell away. Even headless, the drake continued to fly, but not for long. The rest of its lightning dimmed and shrank until the drake was nothing but inert rock, falling and scattering as it fell towards the mountain below.

Koa's Absorb Electricity power was more useful than he'd feared on first picking it up. Draining the natural electricity out of a person was, as it turned out, very bad for them. While generally not very harmful to anyone of the same rank, just a touch could send them falling into seizure or unconscious for a brief but critical moment.

There were circumstances, however, when Koa could use his power to truly cut loose. Thunderstorms. Electric death towers. One guy that looked like William Shatner and hurled bolts of lightning. Best, though, were electric monsters. Storm lizards. Deadpond eels. This was Koa's first time fighting stormspire drakes, but he did so with a savage grin. The electricity coursing through them was second only to lightning elementals.

There was little point throwing the electricity he drained back at them, as was usually the case for such monsters. Instead, he used the absorbed power to refill the mana of his very hungry power set, and to overcharge some of his other abilities.

The rock Koa was attached to was plummeting through the air, no longer connected to the rest of the drake. Koa moved from a crouch to a standing position, still standing on it as if glued by the feet. He glanced around, seeing the crocodile man at around the same altitude. He was also riding a rapidly descending drake, having hooked its wings with some manner of blood rope.

Koa looked up at the huge swarm of drakes above. They were relatively weak, as they had to be to manifest in such numbers. There were two gold ranked ones being engaged by the local gold-rank adventurers. Koa wasn't fool enough to insert himself into that fight, no matter how advantageous his powers. He picked one the other drakes flying around that no one else was fighting. He raised his arm towards it and chanted a spell.

*"Let the heart of the world beat."*

His Ignite Stone ability caused rock to rapidly melt. The harder and more magical the stone, the more powerful the effect. Not only were the drakes both very hard stone and very full of mana, but Koa had overcharged the spell with the power drained from the last drake's electricity.

The stone fragments of the drake grew hot, throbbing red with a heartbeat rhythm. The pulse grew faster and faster, the stone hotter and brighter until it was dripping molten rock. Finally, the drake exploded, showering others nearby in glowing shrapnel. It wasn't enough to do the other drakes real damage, but the distraction allowed adventurers to pounce on them for easy kills.

Koa once again turned into electricity, flashing towards his next victim. He was halfway through draining it when he stopped, continuing to ride as it feebly flew on. His attention had been grabbed by a pair of new airships arriving in the battle. They weren't the first, and while they were among the biggest, that wasn't what stood out.

They were both cloud ships, with hull panels set over the cloud material. The larger showed off more of the underlying cloud material, at least at first. This one accelerated ahead of the other, huge weapons emerging from the uncovered cloud sections. It was the second ship, however, that drew the eye. Not only was it radiating a domineering gold-rank aura, but it was transforming.

The sky ship had arrived in the shape of a massive seagoing vessel. As Koa watched, the decks and hull panels were absorbed until it was just a mass of cloud. The transformation wasn't swift, so he finished off the drake and moved onto another before checking again. By that point, the cloud mass had taken on a ball shape. Triangular panels were emerging from the inside, so black they seemed to absorb the light around them. They each fit together around the cloud mass to form a humungous icosahedron, white light highlighting where each panel met.

In the centre of each black panel was a blue and orange eye. There was something indefinably baleful about them, Koa instinctively glancing away when he tried to stare at them directly. The drakes filled the sky like hornets born of a storm, and the vessel ploughed right into them. Beams blasted from every eye, some blue and some orange.

When the blue beams struck, the drakes' lightning was washed away like a sandcastle struck by a rogue wave. Only chunks of inert stone were left behind, falling away to tumble down the mountainside. The orange beams instead burned the rock away dry leaves before an encroaching bushfire.

The airships seemed focused on the silver-ranked drakes, not interfering with the local adventurers as they tackled the twin gold-rank drakes. Koa grinned and finished off his own drake, ready to seek out more before they were all gone.

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"Configuration D20 is complete," Shade announced on the sky ship bridge. "The monster swarm has been engaged."

"I can't believe you can modify your ship on the go like that," Emir said through voice chat. "No putting back in the flask, no complex redesign. How is that fair?"

"I'll tell you what, Emir," Jason said. "How about we swap airships, but the next time someone has to fight a great astral being or a god or a messenger army single-handed, that one's on you."

"Oh, I couldn't give up my airship," Emir said hurriedly. "I've put so much work into it." Jason laughed and put a hand on Nik's shoulder.

"You ready, buddy?"

"Yeah," Nik said, rolling his shoulders.

"Then go for it. Just don't get mad, alright?"

"About what?"

"Don't worry about it. Just get started."

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Daryll didn't have the range of abilities an essence user enjoyed, but he did have a few tricks up his sleeve. The combination of his troll body and his were-crocodile form gave him the strength of a might essence, the fortitude of an iron essence and the regeneration of an immortal essence. He could supplement those with his versatile blood magic, made all the stronger by the troll blood in his veins. It could reinforce his crocodile hide, add blood venom to his bite, even create prehensile ropes of blood and tendon, with toothy clamps at the end.

After landing on the back of a Drake, Daryll shot a blood rope from each hand, clamping them onto the wings. He yanked hard, locking himself in place and disrupting the creature's flight. The monsters largely ignored aerodynamics, but their wings held the magic that governed their flight. Having them interfered with sent the creature into a half glide, half fall, Daryll riding it as it dropped through the sky.

Daryll ignored the electricity crawling over his feet. His magically reinforced hide was a surprisingly good insulator, and his regeneration healed what little damage got through. The only thing he had to manage was the cramping and reflexive jerking the electricity caused in his muscles.

The gold rank aura that had washed over the battlefield was impossible to miss, but Daryll had felt the lack of hostility, at least to him. It wasn't a drake's aura, and that was enough. While he was too busy to investigate the aura, there was no ignoring the drone that flew down to buzz around his face, matching the speed of the drake. The earthling did a double take at seeing something so obviously technological in Pallimustus. Keeping pace with him, the drone projected a hologram that looked like a computer screen from thirty-year-old science fiction.

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➤ [Nik Asano] has invited you to a raid group. Current raid group leader is [Danielle Geller]. While part of a raid group you will have access to the System, with additional functionality beyond the baseline. You will be added to voice chat, with channels for the full raid, your assigned group and limited access to raid leadership.

➤ Acceptance into the raid group is contingent on acceptance of having the powers of [Nik Asano] interface with you. Do you accept?

YES/NO

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Daryll wasn't an essence user, so had never had access to the System. From the complaints over its recent withdrawal, however, it was something worth having.

"Yes!" he yelled, still struggling with the drake. Its neck had been growing longer, the rocks making up its body slowly rearranging. It now had a long enough neck to snap at him, but he lifted one foot to kick it on the stony snout. While that was happening, the drone had flown out of sight behind him. He did not see it deploy several long, thin needles, but he felt them jam into his back, just below his neck. It passed through his reinforced magical hide without resistance, jabbing the flesh underneath.

He was immediately distracted by a heads-up display appearing, reminiscent of video games he hadn't played in fifteen years. There were bars for mana and stamina, and a green silhouette of his body to indicate his health. To the right edge of his vision was a list of status effects, tucked out of the way but easy to read if he focused. It showed the magical enhancements he had given himself, plus the muscle spasm effect in his legs.

To the left was a column of status boxes for the rest of the group, just health and mana bars with a background coloured by rank. Aside from that, there were tags on the

monsters and the fighters on his own side, complete with honest-to-goodness health bars over their heads.

The sudden visual clutter was disorienting, and he almost missed the drake attempting another bite. Once more, it got a kick to the face for its trouble, just as another window appeared. This one was not projected by the drone but part of his new interface.

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- Situation assessment complete.
  - Enhancing electricity resistance.
  - You have been assigned to raid party: Civilian Assistance.
  - You have entered voice channel: Civilian assistance.
  - Deploying accessories.

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“Accessories?”

He ignored the sudden appearance of startled voices in his head. He felt the spasms in his legs ease, and what looked like a padded metal girdle appeared around his waist. There were spikes around the girdle that shot out, digging into the drake’s body. Metal cables tethering the spikes to the belt tightened, securing him in place.

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- Mountaineer tether harness deployed. Use voice or mental command ‘RELEASE’ to disconnect tethers.

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Daryll grinned and let go of his own tethers of blood and sinew. He then conjured up a hammer in each hand, made from bone and dripping with blood. His laughter was a crocodilian roar as he started smashing the drake with them, the metal tethers holding him secure. The drake was tough, but Daryll was a powerhouse, his twin hammers smashing its body to rubble and dust. In short order, the electricity holding its body together vanished and the remaining rocks fell from the sky.

The metal girdle vanished in a pop of dimensional energy as Daryll dropped alongside the remnants of the drake. He had fallen well below the battle, and even the level of the mountain city. On one side of him was cliff face, and on the other, open sky. He felt something appear on his back and straps wrapped around his waist and shoulders. A helmet encapsulated his head and he heard a roaring blast behind him. There was a fierce jerk, and he was yanked skyward once more.

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- Mountaineer tether harness withdrawn. Jetpack deployed.

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“Oh, hell yes!” Daryll exclaimed as he started rocketing upward. “Is this a *Rocketeer* helmet?”

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➤ Of course it's a \*\*\*\*ing Rocketeer helmet, You want handles with joysticks on them? Just point your \*\*\*\*ing head where you want to \*\*\*\*ing go. Oh, great, Dad turned the \*\*\*\*ing profanity filter back on.

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"What is going on?"

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➤ Don't worry about it, just go fight some monsters. The whole troll-crocodile thing you've got going on is totally sweet, by the way. We should hang out later.

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"Uh, okay?"

He looked up at the people still fighting the drakes. The jetpack steering was intuitive, following whatever direction he was looking. Some of the people above started glowing blue in his new interface.

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➤ Marking group members with potentially advantageous power synergies.

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"Oh, I think this is going to work out."

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Danielle joined the voice channel of the local gold rankers fighting the two gold rank drakes.

"This is Danielle Geller. At my command is a large force of gold-rank adventurers. Would you prefer us to aid with the gold-rank monsters, clear out the silvers or a mix of both?"

"Are you going to listen, or just do what you like?" an adventurer asked bitterly.

"We are just guests here, and freshly arrived ones at that. Your house, your rules."

"We've got the golds contained. Having strangers come along now will just mess things up. Take care of the silvers."

"Very well. Reach out if you need anything, and we'll talk again when it's done."

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The gold rankers pouring out of Emir and Jason's cloud ships took to the silver-rank drakes like a flamethrower hitting a bug swarm. Humphrey swung his sword to send waves of destructive force like skyborne tsunamis. Zara created living clouds that flowed around adventurers to envelop the drakes. It turned the monsters' own electricity against them, destroying them with their own power.

Others focused on crowd control, especially as the drakes started to flee. Jason hunted down runners, dosing them with afflictions and moving on. Lightning dripped blood

and stone turned to rot as drakes fell from the sky, too weak to stay in the air. The mountainside became splattered with their gooey remains.

The rest either chased down runners with Jason or kept loose drakes from reaching the city as they scattered. Sophie and Danielle kept an eye on the adventurers and civilians who had joined the fight, intervening as needed with their blinding speed.

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The intercession of the gold rankers marked the effective end of the danger, both to the city and those who rushed to defend it. Once the last of the drakes were done, those not out looting gathered in the sky port. Overhead, sky ships that had avoided the fight were left in holding patterns. Those that had engaged the monsters and been damaged were prioritised for repairs and were being brought in to dock.

Sharp wind pushed snow along the ground, the high-altitude city unfriendly to low rankers. Jason and his companions endured the weather easily, gathered on the tarmac at the base of a sky port docking tower. There was a large crowd of likewise high-ranking adventurers, along with civilians who had participated. Everyone not off looting monsters had come together after the fight.

There were a lot of gold rankers, many of them famous, leaving a lot of silver rankers starry-eyed. Jason's identity hadn't been noticed yet, at least by anyone that cared, so he'd quietly switched to civilian clothes and disguised his aura as silver rank. He was talking with Nik, complimenting his efforts. Nik was sounding like a telegram machine as most of what he yelled at Jason was bleeped out.

"It's matter of professionalism," Jason told Nik.

"How would you know?" Neil chimed in, earning him a scathing look from Jason.

"I'm trying to teach a lesson here, Neil."

"And I'm wondering when you learned it yourself. You realise your intimidation routine works better when you don't have a recording crystal playing Wang Chung, right?"

Jason turned as a loud voice yelled out in a New Zealand accent.

"Lady Danielle! Over here!"

A young Māori man pushed his way through the crowd.

"Howsitgoin?" He asked Danielle. "I've been in town a couple of days. Want to know where to get the best chips?"

"I do," Nik said, heading in that direction. "How are you, Koa?"

Jason looked at the New Zealander with no trace of cores in his aura.

"Who is that?"