

## Chapter 767

### Of a Mind to Kill You

Beaufort's body contained far too much metal to fit within his elven frame. When not in his war form, most of it was contained in a dimensional space created by his star seed. In almost every instance, that was a convenience, the star seed even shielding the dimensional space from most interference. Most was not all, however, and every time Beaufort opened the portal within himself to extract the additional material, he felt the elemental energy attempt to seep in and corrupt it. It failed, of course, as it was nothing next to the power of the Builder, but the process of shifting into or out of his war form was excruciatingly painful.

If he was allowed his preference, Beaufort would have remained in his war form at all times. This was not possible — or, at least, very ill-advised — because of the need for diplomacy. They needed the brightheart smoulders, who would not take well to a fifteen-foot metal skeleton with occasional patches of living flesh. For reasons that escaped Beaufort, people seemed to especially object to the metallic skeleton not being shaped like bones. Beaufort's true body was an industrial construction of dark iron girders held together with heavy bolts; all practicality and no pointless flourish. It was the beauty of simplicity and function.

To Beaufort, his form was so much more perfect than his old elf body which now served as little more than a disguise. Diverging significantly from the humanoid norm, he had two extra arms, each longer than his legs. They were each capable of wielding a variety of magically enhanced weapons, and while it pained him to swap them out through his internal portal space, the results were worth the discomfort. It took more than a little suffering to deter a true servant of the Builder.

Carving a path through the horde of elemental messengers demonstrated the glory of what the Builder had turned him into. The messengers weren't intelligent, but possessed cunning enough to reserve their gold-rankers and spend their replaceable silvers. This meant that Beaufort and his fellow golds could burrow deep into the enemy, raw power overcoming the massive deficit in numbers.

This was a crucial moment for the Builder cult forces, one where everything could fall apart. It might have been wiser to make a break for the surface once the Adventure Society expedition and the messengers had exhausted themselves on one another. Beaufort had decided against that move as it was an all or nothing play against extremely long odds. They would need to make it up the shaft, past the retreated expedition and

whatever else they ran into along the way. Then they would face the doubtlessly formidable defensive outpost on the surface.

The elemental messengers that excavated the shaft in the first place had dug their way up and never come back. That was the point at which their gold-rankers started acting with more caution, and Beaufort was going to do the same. Whatever his approach, their chances of survival were slim, but he would massage those odds as much as possible. Whatever indignities he had to swallow and whatever price he had to pay, so long as he was alive, there was a chance of someday rejoining the Builder's forces.

As making a break for it was a fool's errand, that was not the cult's purpose in striking out against the elemental messengers. They were there to get the attention of their greatest enemy, the one they could sense battling above.

They could feel Asano's presence as he went to war with the messengers. In some ways, it was more imposing to the cult than the entire messenger army, and more than a few of his people were unhappy about Beaufort's intentions. Even Beaufort himself felt an instinctive revulsion over joining hands with the Defier. When Asano's presence started growing closer, a stir passed through the cultists.

"He's coming."

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The dark battle, lit by flaring spells and flaming wings, felt purpose-built for Jason's combat style. Used to spending the battle amongst the enemy, he drifted in and out of shadows, his sword in constant motion as he chanted out spells. His shadowy form was all but invisible to the eye and aura senses both. Only Amos Pensinata had even a chance of pinpointing Jason as he moved through a battlefield blanketed with his aura. All that could be seen were the glowing runes of his black blade, one more blur of red in the chaos of fire magic.

Jason's aura power, Hegemony, caused everyone who attacked his allies to suffer the Sin affliction. Sin had little impact on its own as all it did was amplify the rare necrosis damage type. Jason and Colin were the only ones in the battle fielding that damage type, so anyone not engaged by them could ignore it. As a result, any messengers that had been involved in the fighting for any length of time were drenched in Sin.

The special attack, Punish, was extremely weak as attack abilities went. It inflicted Sin and added a small amount of necrotic damage to a weapon strike. Normally that was barely worth noticing, especially to a silver-ranker, requiring Jason to escalate with countless attacks before it became worthwhile. That strategy had been Jason's very first approach to combat when all he had was a small handful of powers. It was slow, inefficient

and something he had long left behind. But now, with an army of foes loading themselves up with Sin, Jason's humble special attack was suddenly a formidable weapon.

Jason moved amongst the enemies with impunity, their elemental powers ill-suited to catching or even sensing his passage through the dark. He was not entirely alone, with a few other members of the expedition delving through the enemy. Assassin-types and other stealth specialists sprung attacks that provided Jason with useful distractions while he occasionally returned the favour.

Unlike assassins, Jason didn't go for the kill. Some foes he left to slowly die of afflictions, the elemental messengers lacking healing powers. For those truly laden with Sin, he maimed them with a single strike. The small amount of necrosis delivered by his attack was amplified to such a level that the merest touch of his sword parted flesh like a chainsaw through long-rotted meat. He aimed for wings, shearing them off and sending the messengers tumbling down the shaft.

As he continued his descent through the enemy ranks, Jason reached the messengers unaffected by his Sin affliction. Too far from the frontline, or the topline as it was in the vertical shaft, they were waiting for enough room to fight. Combat on the wing took space and there were so many messengers that those behind needed their brethren to fall and make room. Having not made attacks, they were untouched by Sin, so Jason switched tactics.

Even Jason's senses had a hard time making anything out through the chaos of battle, but he sensed his proximity to the messenger gold-rankers. Refraining from the frontline of battle, they were hanging back in the area Jason had now reached. They did not seem to have sensed him, the elemental messengers having weaker perception than their original recipe counterparts.

Miriam didn't like Jason's butterflies adding chaos to where the expedition was fighting, but thinning out the backline and distracting the gold-rankers where the expedition wasn't fighting seemed like a good idea. If the butterflies were allowed to run rampant then that was all to the good, but he suspected the gold-rankers would step in. They might have been reduced to animalistic maniacs, but their caution suggested that the gold-rankers weren't completely foolish. If they were too busy shutting down butterflies to engage the expedition at a critical moment, that was good too.

As anticipated, the gold-rankers were smarter than the weaker and presumably freshly-birthed silver-rankers. They recognised the threat of the butterflies and moved to intercept while Jason had already moved on. The gold-rankers had no attention to spare him as it was hard to contain the butterflies once started, especially with potential victims

so plentiful and tightly packed. The gold-rankers were too busy culling their own people and destroying butterflies to pursue him as he went into total stealth mode out of caution. Poor perception or not, they were still gold-rank.

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Beaufort shot a trident from his arm, trailing a chain behind it as it flew towards a messenger at blinding speed. It punched into the messenger's body and each prong injected it with volatile liquid metal. With a yank from Beaufort, the messenger was flung into a group of other messengers before exploding as the volatile metal was agitated. It hardened with the blast, digging into the other messengers as shrapnel before melting again, turning lava hot as it seared them from the inside.

The gold-rank attack was devastating to the messengers, killing some and leaving the others too hurt to continue the fight. Unfortunately, some of the elemental messengers were highly resistant to metal, heat or both. These Beaufort lunged at, even as he retracted his harpoon chain. One of his other arms produced a ceramic axe shrouded in blue energy. The axe was less effective against earth types but carved up the metal, fire and ash varieties handily.

Beaufort looked around for fresh enemies; less a case of finding one than picking one. No matter how many the gold-rank Builder cult vanguard slaughtered, the silver-rank messengers kept coming, fearless and unabated. Beaufort was about to fire off another harpoon when the rotting carcass of a messenger landed on it from above, bouncing off with a wet squelch before continuing its path down.

Corpse rain was not an unfamiliar occurrence as casualties from the battle above dropped down the shaft. But more and more, they were showing signs of massive necrosis. Some fell while largely intact, a wing rotted away as if by some heinous disease. Others were masses of rotting flesh, occasionally leaving a trail of butterflies in their wake, glowing blue and orange.

Beaufort knew about those butterflies and knew to stay clear, directing the cult from anywhere they started spreading. He extended his senses to look for dangerous conglomerations of the butterflies, discovering that the most powerful messengers had rallied in response to the threat. He left them to it, leading his cultists away from the butterflies and the gold-rank messengers to the side of the shaft.

"He's close," Beaufort muttered to himself. Moments later, he felt Asano's aura vanish from above entirely. He stopped fighting, gesturing at his fellow gold-rankers to keep his location clear of enemies.

“You’re already here, aren’t you?” he asked, looking around at the dark. A shadow on the wall opened blue and orange eyes.

“You have lost much in letting yourself become a monstrosity,” Asano’s icy voice said. “Your senses are too weak.”

“Everything is a trade-off,” Beaufort said. “The Builder does not look; he creates.”

“He steals. He kills. How many have you killed in this world, Beaufort? What have you built?”

“I have helped build the future. A humble contribution to the Builder’s grand design.”

The cultists around Beaufort started to realise who was amongst them. The gold-rankers held themselves together, although their auras were thick with barely-restrained hatred. The silver-rankers did less well, few even launching themselves in Asano’s direction. Beaufort’s will spread through the cultists, freezing the attackers in their place. It didn’t stop many from screaming hostility, roaring “DEFIER!” over and over.

“Defier?” Asano asked. “What happened to ‘rejector?’”

“You have done far more than reject the Builder’s embrace, Asano. Many have fought against him, yet few have defied him so successfully as to deny that which he wills.”

“I don’t know about that name,” Asano said, his voice softening from glacially hard. “I didn’t love ‘rejector,’ but ‘defier’ feels like it would fit someone else out there better. Look for more of me kicking your boss back and forth across the cosmos, though; I’m not done with that prick.”

Rage stirred through the cultists and Beaufort suppressed them again.

“We should kill him,” One of the other gold-rankers said. “It would be worth our deaths.”

“But would not achieve his,” Beaufort warned. “The Lord Builder has warned me that Asano is well suited to fighting we who serve great astral beings. He does not want to use our own star seeds as weapons against us, but he can. There is a reason he sent others to kill him.”

“They failed,” the other gold-ranker growled.

“Of course,” Beaufort said. “If even our Lord finds dealing with him an issue, what chance does some god playing pretend have? Asano, if you know my name, and have come this far without attacking, I can only assume you’re aware that we need each other.”

“So I’ve been told.”

“Then I would thank you to not provoke my people. It will only hurt you in the long run.”

“Yeah. I did the same with Shako, and he killed me. On the other hand, here I am, and where is he? I’m told I should use you, Beaufort. That your intentions are honest. I’m of a mind to kill you anyway.”

“Then do it or stop preening,” Beaufort said. “In case you failed to notice, my people are holding off an army of these abominations so we can have this little chat.”

“You can’t see it,” Jason said, “but my eyebrows shot right up at Erector Set Skeletor calling someone else an abomination. You’re not wrong, though. If we’re going to work together, we’ll need somewhere to sit down and talk this through. Do you have some kind of redoubt my people can fight their way to?”

“That’s why we’re here: to lead your people back to the surviving locals. The messengers have overrun most of their territory and they’re holding on to one last bastion.”

“That all sounds like too much to explain here and now. I’ll bring my people down but they won’t trust easily.”

“More easily than mine trust you.”

“But I can’t make mine freeze if they get stroppy, so you don’t get to provoke them the way I’ve been poking at you, understand?”

“Then I would ask that you reciprocate. From this point forward.”

“Fair enough.”

The blue and orange eyes closed and Beaufort sensed Asano’s aura once again surge far above them.