

## 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-birthing 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.

## Chapter 768

### Humungous Hairy Hands

Jason stepped out of a Shade body that was standing on the expedition's main defensive platform. Ranged attackers were arrayed along the barricaded edge or firing through holes in the platform itself. Stone-shapers were repairing damage as the platform was attacked from below.

"Tactical Commander," Jason said through the voice chat's command channel.

"It's good that you're back," Miriam responded. "Your voice chat grew increasingly unreliable the further you went. How did it go?"

"I jabbed them to see if they'd yelp, but this Beaufort character seems to have them on a tight leash. I think we can operate alongside the cult so long as we keep a lid on our own people as well. I still don't like it, but if life were easy, we wouldn't need adventurers. If Knowledge thinks it's the way to go, I'm inclined to trust her on it."

"I heard you were disinclined to trust gods."

"Sure, but on one hand we've got the most knowledgeable entity in the universe who has every reason to want all these interdimensional invaders off her planet. On the other, we have what information we've gleaned from the regular messengers. The ones we've just confirmed are setting us up for a sudden but inevitable betrayal. In this instance, I'm going to pick the side that doesn't have an explicit reason to kill me personally. That I'm aware of."

"Then what's the move? Does the Builder cult have somewhere we can hole up?"

"They're claiming that they've shackled up with what's left of the locals, who I hope haven't all been converted to team Builder. They have some kind of secure holdout position where we can sit down and hash out what comes next."

"And you don't think it's a trap?"

"I think that's why Knowledge made an appearance. If she hadn't, I'd almost certainly think it's a trap. Too much of our information is based on what our enemies have told us."

"Then we'd best go get some information firsthand, don't you think?"

"I do," Jason said. "I'm just not sure how we get through this sea of elemental messengers without losing anyone."

"Leave that to me, Operations Commander. You've done your job and figured out what we need to do. Let me do mine and figure out how."

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Jason was familiar with small group tactics from working with his team, but the coordination Miriam demonstrated over the entire expedition was well outside his expertise. With a fresh objective and a good sense of the obstacles ahead, Miriam developed a plan and set the expedition into motion.

It began by retrieving the supplies from the crawlers that she now chose to abandon. The supplies were distributed to various familiars and adventurers who could carry them with powers ranging from telekinetic shells to conjured cargo netting. Most important was the messenger device that was moved into Onslow's shell along with many of the adventurers.

Onslow's shell served as a miniature flying fortress, with a child-sized humanoid tortoise as its pilot, commander and adorable team mascot. The shell proved especially effective against the elemental messengers as the rune tortoise's powers were also elemental in nature. Clive had set up a potent magical array to absorb elemental energy which proved to have numerous benefits.

The array fuelled Onslow's powers not just from absorbing messenger attacks but also by drawing elemental energy from the ambient magic. This allowed Onslow to fire off his abilities rapidly without drawing on Clive's mana, as well as creating a zone where elemental power was less prevalent in the ambient magic. This reduced the impact of the local magic on abilities and devices negatively affected by it.

Most importantly, absorbing elemental attacks made Onslow's shell a safe haven. Until and unless the gold-rank messengers arrived with the power to overload Clive's array, Onslow's shell was the most secure location within the expedition. Miriam didn't let that go to waste, having Onslow grow his shell to maximum size and loading it up with adventurers. This gave protection and mobility to ranged attackers and healers that would otherwise be fixed behind battlements, too vulnerable or immobile to reach key areas of the battle.

The next stage of Miriam's plan was to detach the defensive platforms from the walls and let them drop, adventurers still aboard. The platforms carved a rapid downward path, plunging the expedition into the heart of the enemy. The elemental messengers reacted swiftly and it was not long before the platforms were smashed out from under the adventurers.

This signalled the next phase of Miriam's plan, capitalising on their downward momentum with a wild blitz formation that gave up cohesion for a hard and fast assault that dug them further down through the enemy. This tactic was only allowed to continue for a brief period, the messengers continuing to demonstrate the losses an incohesive assault



accrued. Allowing it only long enough to make the most of their downward momentum, Miriam directed the expedition into a more regimented approach. Switching from an all-out pace to a controlled descent, the expedition assumed what Miriam called a drill formation.

The formation was cylindrical, like a drill bit, with the gold-rank adventurers forming the tip that bit into the messenger forces and allowed them to drill down. The frontline-suited silver-rankers formed the threads of the drill, spiralling around the more vulnerable adventurers in the middle. These were the researchers, backline healers and less mobile ranged attackers, along with the adventurers and familiars serving as porters.

Onslow was an exception, swiftly proving himself the most valuable member of the expedition. In addition to porting critical supplies, he was also a one-tortoise cavalry. Nigh-impregnable and loaded up with adventurers otherwise unable to reach the frontline, Onslow's arrival at any point of the defensive line was a stabilising presence. He was also a way station for adventurers in need of healing, respite after draining their mana pool or rescue after their means of flight was compromised.

While Miriam's multi-stage strategy was proving effective, it was as true on Pallimustus as on Earth that no plan survived first contact with the enemy. Without the crawlers, every member of the expedition was required to fly or use an equivalent technique, and some fared better than others. Many with lesser mobility powers or reliant on external devices found their positions precarious. Shared flight like Sophie's Leaf on the Wind power were the least effective as they were often easily compromised, and if the one using the ability fell, anyone they were carrying fell too. Using familiars and summons as mounts was more effective as they could usually endure quite a beating.

While Onslow was the most obvious example of this there were many others. Adventurers rode double up on griffins and other, less familiar flying creatures. One of the strangest was Stash in the form of a monster called a gripler. A gripler was a creature whose main body was massive, round and hairy, with no discernable head or sensory organs. Six implausibly long arms, something like those of an orangutan but with too many elbows and oversized hands, were spaced evenly around the body in a ring. At the underside of the body, the hair concealed an orifice that blasted extremely unpleasant gas downwards to keep it aloft.

"Humphrey?" Jason asked through the team's voice channel.

"Yes, Jason?"

"Did your familiar turn into a headless hexapedal orangutan that flies using the power of farts?"

"What's an orangutan?"

Rick Geller's team had been adopted by Stash, more or less voluntarily, and he was flying them around the battlefield in mostly the directions they wanted. They weren't wildly comfortable with being held in Stash's humungous hairy hands like a toy, but it was proving effective. Only the team tank, Neil's friend Dustin Kettering, kept up his complaints beyond the early stages of the battle.

Stash's massive hand was gripped around the legs of Dustin's heavily armoured body. His torso, arms and head were covered in conjured diamond spikes variously stained bloody and scorched black from striking elemental messengers.

"I am not—"

Dustin was interrupted as Stash brought him down like a spiked mace on a messenger.

"—A BLOODY MELEE WEAPON!"

"Just bear with it," Rick's sister Phoebe told him. "You've taken out more of them than any of us."

"It's alright for you," Dustin shot back. "He isn't... oh no..."

Stash smashed Dustin and Rick together like a child playing with toys, several messengers caught between them. Dustin's weight and spike provided crushing force while, on the other end, Rick had set his spear against Stash's hand and impaled the messengers with the impact.

"Good job, Stash," Rick said happily.

"This is a pile of heidel shi—"

Dustin was cut off again as he was used to hammer a sturdy metal-type messenger like a recalcitrant nail. The rapid blows proved Dustin the sturdier, although he did have to conjure fresh spikes alongside swearing profusely at the gas Stash had waved him through.

Phoebe was a pugilist, like a more damage-oriented version of Sophie. She was using one of Stash's hands as a platform, the familiar holding his palm flat for her to launch from, strike multiple enemies and return. She couldn't fly, but pinballing between foes was very much in her wheelhouse.

"Stash, sweetie," she asked. "Could you pop me over to see Dusty for a little bit?"

Stash stopped waving Dustin around and brought the hands holding them together so they could be face to face. Phoebe was standing on an open palm while Dustin was still tightly gripped.

"Dusty, is it really that bad?" she asked.

"Yes!"

“Oh, come now,” she said and reached out to tug off his helmet. She planted a gentle kiss on his cheek before pushing his helmet back down as his face turned red.

“Thank you Stash, dear,” she said.

“Wait—” Dustin yelled before resuming semi-voluntary mace duty.

“What was that?” Phoebe’s brother yelled in her direction, not bothering with voice chat.

“I thought he deserved a little reward,” Phoebe told him. “He’s doing very well.”

“Do you know what that’s going to do to team cohesion?” Rick asked.

“Oh, we don’t fraternise between team members?” Rick’s fiancé Hannah said. “I’ll have to remember that.”

“What? No, that’s not... she’s my sister... oh crap.”

Along with familiars like Onslow and Stash, summons were proving their worth. Not just mounts and supply transit, their expendability made them valuable frontline fighters. The aerial nature of combat meant that not all summons were of use, however. Neither Farrah’s magma elemental nor Gary’s forge golem could fly, so they hadn’t summoned them.

A summon that was proving effective was a giant insect that carried both people and supplies inside its hollow carapace, much like Onslow. It was faster than the rune tortoise but not as resilient, lacking Onslow’s hard shell and the protection of Clive’s magical array. For this reason, it served to secure the people in the middle of the formation instead of running around the frontline, and the supplies it carried were less critical.

Neil’s chrysalis golem couldn’t fly any more than Farrah or Gary, but he had summoned it early in the battle anyway, when the expedition was still on the platform. He’d gotten some odd looks from other adventurers when he directed it to walk off the platform where it immediately plunged into the enemy and out of sight.

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### Ability: [Chrysalis Golem] (Growth)

- **Summoning.**
- **Cost: Very high mana.**
- **Cooldown: 6 hours.**
  
- **Current rank: Silver 4 (78%).**
- **Effect (iron): Summons a chrysalis golem.**
- **Effect (bronze): Shoots spikes while in the chrysalis state.**

- **Effect (silver): Chrysalis state resolves more quickly and the resulting form is better adapted to the environment.**
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The fundamental ability of a chrysalis golem was to enter a near-indestructible chrysalis state after suffering critical damage. This hadn't taken long as the messengers pounded on the massive weight barreling through them.

In its chrysalis state, the golem was a large and mostly inert lump of crystal that shrugged off attacks as it continued bowling messengers out of its path. Its singular activity was to rapid-fire crystal spears in every direction like an explosive gemstone echidna. When the golem emerged from the chrysalis, it took a new form shaped in reaction to the attacks it had endured. As of silver-rank, it was also much better at adapting to the environment it was in.

Silver-rank also reduced the gestating time for the post-chrysalis state, and the result was far more well-defined than the crude giant it had been. It vaguely held the appearance of an elemental messenger, except made of diamonds and even larger, some twenty-five feet tall with a massive wingspan. It also didn't have humanoid arms and legs, instead boasting mantis-like bladed limbs. Those limbs, along with diamond-sharp wings, slashed savagely at the messengers, often sending them tumbling with their own wings sheared off.

The messengers responded to the golem now ascending towards the expedition with savage brutality that didn't actually accomplish very much. The problem with their narrow variety of attack forms was that they were easier to adapt to, and the golem had added their technological and biological distinctiveness to its own.

Stone spears and metal limbs shattered the golem's crystal surface, scattering shards that did not fall away but swarmed like angry hornets. Clouds of razor-sharp crystal swept over the messengers, metal and earth types largely unaffected but others found their wings and flesh flayed away. The golem's missing crystal regrew swiftly, restoring it to wholeness.

The golem ignored fire and magma attacks entirely as they splashed harmlessly off it. The only effect was a red glow that built within the golem until it was shining bright red. Eventually, the golem sent that energy shooting off, striking a cluster of the sturdier messengers, earth bodies exploding and metal bodies melting.

As domineering as the golem was, the messengers proved resistance was not entirely futile. For all that the golem had adapted to their attacks, the sheer weight of numbers was overwhelming as it fought its way back to the expedition. The messengers weren't smart, but they could tell the difference between attacks that worked and ones that

didn't. The fire and magma types backed off, leaving the more effective earth and metal types to hammer at it.

These messengers were largely impervious to the shard swarms and their attacks did do damage, even if it was rapidly repaired. Enough blows in rapid succession meant the damage accumulated faster than it could be recovered. One of the golem's limbs was lost, then a second. Damage building up on the wings slowed it down until it was struggling to stay aloft.

Seeing that the golem was on the verge of falling, the messengers lunged in for a final attack with renewed vigour. A bubble-shaped barrier snapped into place and exploded outward, flinging the attacking messengers into their fellows, tumbling in clusters of tangled wings and limbs.

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#### Ability: [Burst Shield] (Shield)

- **Special ability (recovery, retribution).**
- **Cost: Moderate mana.**
- **Cooldown: 20 seconds.**
  
- **Current rank: Silver 5 (38%).**
  
- **Effect (iron): Create a short-lived shield that negates an incoming attack and explodes out, knocking back nearby enemies and inflicting concussive damage. High-damage attacks of silver-rank or higher may not be entirely negated.**
  
- **Effect (bronze): Inflicts [Vibrant Echo] on anyone affected by the blast.**
  
- **Effect (silver): Inflicts [Slow Learner] on anyone affected by the blast.**
  
  
- **[Vibrant Echo] (affliction, damage-over-time, magic, stacking): Inflicts ongoing resonating-force damage.**
  
- **[Slow Learner] (affliction, magic, stacking): Retribution damage you suffer is increased. Attacking a barrier while subject to this affliction extends the duration of the barrier and allows it to block an additional attack. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.**

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Onslow drifted low in the formation as Neil shot out his barrier and armour abilities to shield the golem, barely visibly through the throng of messengers. Belinda aided him by duplicating and resetting his powers, as Neil did himself using his power-resetting magical tattoo.

Miriam directed other adventurers to help, having sensed the effectiveness of the golem and soon the Slow Learner affliction of Neil's ability proved its value. Repeated

attacks against his barriers started extending their duration and letting them block more attacks until the messengers themselves were keeping them perpetually up while the golem regrew the damage it had suffered. The messengers might have the intellect to realise what attacks did and didn't work, but analysing the effects of an essence ability was beyond at least the freshly birthed silver-rank variants.

"I love stupid people," Neil said happily as the golem fought clear of the throng to join the expedition.

"No you don't," Belinda pointed out.

"You're right," Neil said. "Let's kill them all."

## Chapter 769

### Echoes of the Dead

While many of the adventurers excelled using familiars, summons and flight powers as platforms from which to battle the messengers, not all fared as well. The most vulnerable were those relying on external flight devices. Some were fine, usually those with the most elaborate and expensive devices. Former Hurricane Princess Zara rode a two-headed pegasus made of sapphires that not only provided transport but added to her combat power.

Zara specialised in wide-area ranged attacks, so having her construct mount cracking heads with its hooves biting with its twin heads was useful. It even shot sapphire feathers from its wings that punched through flesh and bone like a railgun, or struck bodies of stone and sent spiderweb cracks spreading through them.

Zara's exceptional flying construct was very much the exception, a precious item she had inherited from her Aunt Vesper. Even a princess from one of the most powerful nations on the planet was lucky to have it, meaning that most of the flight devices were not as impressive.

One of the more popular flying tools in Yaresh was a cloud that one person could fly around on. Those used by the expedition were based on metal and air, rather than water and air, functioning something like magical nanoswarms. The versions that relied on water magic were not brought along, under the assumption that they would fail quite quickly. The elemental energy of the local magic still seeped into them, but their metal makeup was compatible with that power.

At first, it went well, the local magic even supercharged the performance of the metal and air clouds. But as that power built up, it became more than the devices could handle. Overcharged with elemental energy, devices started failing in various ways. Most commonly they just dispersed themselves, dropping their passengers as the tiny fragments of metal scattered. Other clouds did the same but the fragments combusted, burning up in a shower of sparks. A handful behaved extremely oddly and collected together in a swarm that dove down into the enemy, attacking any messenger they passed over. This wasn't effective, since they were tiny bits of rounded metal that couldn't do much more than get in the messenger's eyes. It was far from worth all those clouds having dumped their riders.

The expedition reacted swiftly when an adventurer lost their ride. Miriam had anticipated this from the moment she ordered the crawlers left behind and had

preparations already in place. Falling adventurers were snagged up with a variety of powers, from swooping familiars to anyone who could bring others along on a teleport. Shade bodies appeared out of nowhere to turn into personal flight devices, although this was something of a last resort. Shade's vehicle forms were not built for the rigours of combat and a few rescues had false starts as a flying motorcycle or personal flight suit was destroyed by a messenger attack.

Miriam's drill formation proved effective but grew increasingly shaky as they descended through the messengers pressing endlessly on all sides. Each flight device that failed, each adventurer that had a flying summons destroyed out from under them was a fresh gap in the defences.

Casualties were healed up and sent back to the line but there was inexorable attrition. They had yet to suffer any deaths, but some injuries were too severe to heal quickly without essence abilities that required ritual magic to use. Neil had an essence ability, but he had neither the time nor the space to use it. Onslow's shell was normally a good space for such magic but it was crowded with adventurers and being rocked by continuous assaults. Onslow's defences were holding but it was not an environment conducive to careful and precise ritual casting. There was a reason that Clive's use of combat rituals was so unusual.

Despite the attrition, the expedition was proving the power of guild-level elite adventurers. Strategy, intelligence and preparation were paying off as they withstood an army that would have swarmed across the surface world like the wrath of a vengeful god. The messengers, while numerous and powerful, were also thoughtless, reckless unskilled, most having been freshly spawned.

The elemental messengers simply weren't the threat that regular messengers were. Aside from the gold-rankers being smart enough to stay away, they lacked any sign of coordination, strategy, tactics, or even self-preservation. Trained and experienced adventurers could not only do better but exploit those weaknesses to maximum effect. They also lacked the variety of powers that regular messengers possessed, let alone essence users.

Versatility was what made well-trained essence users the most powerful force at any given rank. As for the elemental messengers, a stream of fire versus a cone of fire, or a stone spear versus a metal one did not make for a complex mixture of attacks. It was so predictable that the expedition had brought a massive supply of potions and tools tailored to counter and resist exactly those attacks. It was this preparation, more than anything else, that had prevented any deaths in the face of so many enemies.



While the adventurers were showing their worth, the weight of numbers remained an inescapable fact. And while the expedition held almost every advantage, that didn't make the messengers weak. Elemental energy had supercharged their powers and the tools and potions of the adventurers wouldn't hold out forever. Mana pools dwindled and exhaustion crept in, even silver-rank stamina lasting only so long.

"We're lucky they still haven't committed their gold-rankers," Miriam said over the command channel.

"I can sense them," Amos responded. Miriam had looped him in as his superior senses made him the best early warning system they had.

"Are they showing signs of moving to attack?" Miriam asked.

"They are still working to contain Asano's butterflies," Amos reported. "With enemies so tightly packed, they are extremely hard to suppress."

"They are suppressing them, though?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps we should have included a traditional affliction specialist after all," Miriam said. "But even our most pessimistic projections never predicted numbers like these."

"Their gold-rankers are thinning out their own numbers for us," Amos pointed out. "Not enough to practically diminish the whole but there are areas where their numbers are less dense now. We should aim to pass through those areas they've already culled themselves."

"We don't want to go close enough to tempt the gold-rankers into an attack," Miriam said.

"They're following the spread of the butterflies," Amos said. "I can direct us towards an area they've moved on from."

"Then please do."

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Both the Builder cult and the expedition were battered and spent by the time they came face to face. The tension between them almost led to disaster as they paused, each ready for confrontation. The ceaseless torrent of messengers did not care for the tension of the would-be allies and continued their attacks unabated. The defensive lines of both groups threatened to collapse, pushing the two groups almost back to back.

The adventurers and the cultists both had cards left up their sleeves, their last resorts held back for emergencies. Long cooldown powers, potent abilities that exhausted most of what mana they had left. For a blazing moment, the messengers were the ones being

overwhelmed. It was enough pushback for the expedition and the cultists to reform their lines and achieve a reluctant but functional joint formation.

The final stretch down the shaft had the cultists and especially the expedition all but spent. It was the time for high-endurance combatants to shine, such as Jason and Sophie. Having fought through countless enemies, they had grown stronger instead of weaker. With boons stacked high, they rivalled some of the gold-rankers for raw power and took on core defensive roles in the formation.

Sophie was all but invisible, a streak of motion that appeared only to intercept an attack and hit back far harder than she normally could. She fended off attacks with her hands, feet, shins and forearms.

“Did I just see you block a fireball with a headbutt?” Jason asked.

“Shut up and fight!”

“Ooh, strict nanny.”

“Jason!”

“Sorry, Hump.”

Jason’s speed was also blinding, although his jerky, pinball movement was crude next to Sophie’s graceful flow. He also intercepted attacks, but instead of negating them, he just took the hits. A few were blocked by a pair of shields generated by orbs borrowed from Gordon, but many more impaled, lacerated, burned or even decapitated him. He burned through life force, only to draw even more from the enemies. Jason’s Feast of Blood power drained all enemies in a wide area, and the messengers were filling the space around them like bricks in a wall.

More than a few of the cultists were keeping an eye on Jason as he fought. Beaufort ignored them so long as their combat performance didn’t suffer, although even he was sometimes taken aback. When something bounced off him he reached out and grabbed it, discovering it was Jason’s severed head. He looked around to see Jason still fighting, his hood masking if he had a replacement head or was simply still fighting without it.

He watched Jason suck the life out of a whole raft of messengers. The vibrant red of their life force was draining into Jason in so many streams that it looked like a tide of blood. The messengers were left as withered husks and fell out of the air, more moving in to replace them immediately.

Beaufort tossed the head aside and went back to fighting.

Jason and Sophie weren’t alone in growing stronger rather than weaker over the course of the battle. For all that they approached gold-rank performance in certain metrics, neither held a candle to team Moon’s Edge’s berserker, Alice. She was just as buffed as

Jason and Sophie, but at a gold-rank baseline, rather than silver. She was less a combatant at that point than a living zone of annihilation at the front of the formation.

Arabelle Remore was also quite powerful, floating by herself, surrounded by massive jars. Alternately filled with red life force and blue mana, she seemed isolated and vulnerable, which was part of the trap. Any messengers who came close found their life force and mana yanked out of them and added to the jars.

Throughout the battle, Arabelle had been accumulating vast amounts of life force and mana. She spent them in massive quantities, showering the expedition with mass healing and the enemies in crippling medical maledictions. Their silver-rank, largely elemental bodies should have been immune to them, but Arabelle didn't care about affliction immunity any more than Jason did.

Like many adventurers, especially from Vitesse, Arabelle dabbled in different roles while maintaining her position as a healer. She was not an affliction specialist and only had a couple of grim powers as trump cards. Doing anything more with her afflictions would take someone else, and Jason was happy to oblige. He drained all the toxins and diseases Arabelle bestowed, leaving transcendent damage in their place.

Battling their way down the shaft, the uneasy allies formed a grudging acceptance of one another. That acceptance was heavily reliant on the leadership of both sides, each with their reasons to want the other dead. Every adventurer knew that the cultists were either invaders from another universe or, worse, traitors who had sided with them. They were all disciplined, but Miriam still gave a few stern reminders of the situation in which they found themselves. As for the cultists, Beaufort's iron control was the only reason many of them weren't shrieking their hatred and fear at Jason.

The shaft ended in an underground chamber that seemed impossibly vast. Only his ability to see through the dark allowed Jason to see across the kilometres of width and depth as the group descended through a vast hole in the roof. His amazement was undercut by a pervasive stench of death that seemed to infest even the magic around them.

The elemental aspects of the ambient magic around them had grown consistently stronger as the expedition made its way down from the surface. By the end, it had surrounded them oppressively, like sitting between two fat people on a domestic flight. But, on entering that vast chamber, all that was pushed aside. Like a river full of corpses flooding over an embankment, death washed over everything. Aura and magical senses alike were muted, quashed by a lifeless dread.

Most adventurers of silver and especially gold rank had seen horrors. The kind of threats that produced mass civilian casualties were the most important for adventurers to confront. Whole towns wiped out by plague zombies, vampires feeding on herds of livestock and sending them on a rampage as hideous ghouls. The lingering energy of death in this chamber dwarfed all of that.

Very few members of the group were unaffected, even the cultists that had seen it before. Jason and Farrah were the ones able to endure it the best after their experiences on Earth. The city of Makassar had seen hundreds of thousands die, then raised up using foul necromancy. They had spent days wading through the dead, returning the unliving mockeries to rest. The result of infighting between the factions of Earth, it was a critical point for Jason. His time on Earth had already made him harder, but that was the beginning of his descent into savagery and the edge of madness.

“Do not linger at the top of the shaft,” Beaufort warned driving the group down into the open space. “The messengers won’t follow into the heart of the chamber.”

True to his word, the messengers swept out of the shaft like a swarm of insects and turned off in the direction of the nearest wall. They streamed out of the shaft, like a waterfall that wouldn't end, but eventually, it did. As if the expedition no longer existed, they hurried off, Jason seeing them vanish into a massive hole torn into the wall of the chamber, which was otherwise covered in buildings carved into the rock. The massive hole was far from the only damage, but Jason didn't look further as Beaufort addressed the entire group.

“They will not tarry here,” Beaufort said, “and they are right not to. We must also move with haste, but avoid getting close to anything. We will move through the air, staying clear of the roof and the walls until we reach the far side. Most of all, stay high above the ground.”

Beaufort led them in the opposite direction from where the messengers went and towards the furthest end of the chamber. As they moved, Jason continued to examine their new surroundings. It was an abandoned city, with buildings rising from the floor, hanging from the ceiling and carved into the walls. Signs of destruction were everywhere, with wall buildings caved in, floor buildings collapsed and the roof buildings fallen to the ground below. Holes pockmarked every surface, each large enough to drive a small car through. The ground was covered in some kind of organic substance, lifeless and inert.

“This is the largest chamber of this underground realm,” Beaufort explained as he led the group on. “It was the home to the vast majority of the brightheart smoulders. Now there is nothing but the echoes of the dead. The messengers avoid this place, even withdrawing

the roots of their foul tree. Without their wariness of this chamber, we would not have lasted as long as we have.”

“I’d like to hear more about that tree,” Jason said. “I already suspected...”

He trailed off and turned to look behind them.

“Beware behind,” Amos said, beating him to the punch.

Soon the others sensed the spectral entities that had followed them, having emerged from the roof buildings closest to the shaft. Many had dived in amongst the messengers who scattered like panicked birds, a stark contrast to their previous implacable behaviour. Others came for the expedition and their reluctant cultist allies. Miriam swiftly deployed those with effective powers to intercept, Jason included. The entities were weak, mostly iron and bronze-rank, with a scant few silvers, and were dealt with swiftly enough. The expedition continued on.

“Most things in this chamber have little power,” Beaufort explained, “and lack a physical form. That is not always the case, however, and the danger of death, twisted to wretched purpose, is underestimated at your peril. I can promise you that.”

Beaufort continued to lead them on, staying well away from the buildings above and below. Jason occasionally spotted movement, seeing various shapes meandering about. Some looked like messengers, stumbling like zombies. Others were plodding, shapeless forms like sluggish earth elementals. All had auras stained by death.

Reaching the far side of the chamber, Beaufort led them towards a circular gate set midway up the wall. It was built into the wall, unlike the ragged hole the messengers had used. It was massive, large enough to pass an airship through, and blocked by an enormous stone roller. More normal-sized double doors were set into the middle of the roller, each constructed of metal and etched with protective sigils. The buildings around the gate had all been caved in, the destruction too thorough to have been anything but methodical.

“We make sure nothing gets too close to the gate,” Beaufort explained. “It’s an ongoing effort.”

“Why is the gate so high in the wall?” Miriam asked.

“This was for flying vehicles and festival parades, so I’m told,” Beaufort said. “The doors are new. The ground-level entrance to the next chamber is too much of a risk.”

A half dozen guards stood in alcoves to either side of the doors. The alcove on one side held cultists that looked normal but whose auras reeked of the Builder’s magic. On the other side were smoulders, but not like those Jason had seen before. They appeared normal for their kind, being stocky with dark skin marked by glowing runes. Like the

cultists, it was their auras that differentiated them from the ordinary. They each had strong magic, but not that of essence users. These people were imbued with elemental power, much like what the expedition had been sensing all the way down the shaft. In these people, though, it was less erratic, cleaner and more stable.

Beaufort moved out ahead, sharing a look with one of the smoulder guards.

“We wondered if you would return at all,” the guard said. “The enemy you spoke of is amongst these people?”

“He is,” Beaufort said.

“Then you had best deliver him.”

The red runes on the guard's skin glowed brighter for a moment and the carved sigils on the doors glowed at the same time. Both runes and sigils faded and the doors swung open.

## Chapter 770

### Citadel

The sense of death from the previous chamber vanished the moment the expedition passed through the double doors set into the giant gate. The pervasive elemental influence on the ambient magic snapped back into place so sharply that Jason doubted it was natural. His suspicions were only raised by the elemental power feeling a lot more stable than it had in the shaft. He reached out to Clive through voice chat with an idea.

“Can’t say,” Clive responded. “There are a lot of variables I’d have to check. Definitely not with a regular portal, but your soul portal... maybe.”

The arrival of a combined force of adventurers and Builder cultists did not, unsurprisingly, go unremarked. A defensive squadron rose up to meet them, mostly travelling on flat floating rocks. As Beaufort worked to calm a visibly agitated defence commander, Jason and the other expedition members took in the last bastion of the brightheart smoulders.

While not as vast as the one they had just left, the chamber was still implausibly large and, to Jason’s sensibilities, more impressive. Buildings were again carved into the walls but not from the ceiling and floor, with a significant exception. Massive pillars rose from the floor and descended from the ceiling to suspend a massive citadel in the very centre of the chamber.

The pillars themselves were some of the largest towers Jason had ever seen, but they weren’t just solid supporting posts. The windows and balconies showed that the pillars were occupied spaces. Not being solid, Jason doubted they could hold the weight of the massive citadel without some kind of magic. It could be enchantment but he suspected the whole chamber had been carved out of some high-rank magical stone. Normally that would ping his magical senses, but the ambient elemental magic blanketed everything.

The citadel itself was a confusing mess of different design elements. It looked like someone had taken sculptures, frescoes and buildings in a dozen clashing architectural styles and attempted to meld them together with magic. Badly. There was gothic statuary, time-worn crenellations and scattered murals with no cohesive theme. Some looked like defensive measures that were uselessly suspended in the air, while other parts were artistic and without practical purpose.

“Can you make any sense of this design?” Jason asked Miriam. They were standing at the front of the expedition atop Onslow’s shell, flanked by their respective teams.

“I’m recognising elements of architectural designs I know,” Humphrey said. “Old, though. Historical buildings more than anything modern.”

“Valetta, you’re an architect,” Miriam said. “What do you make of it?”

“Master Geller is correct,” Miriam’s teammate said. “This is an amalgam of design elements from the surface, but all centuries out of favour. Look at the pillars. They reflect the buildings we saw in the previous chamber and are likely a reflection of the architectural style of the people that dwell here. The architectural abomination in the middle is almost certainly the result of a dimensional prefabrication disaster.”

“Which is what, exactly?” Miriam asked.

“A dimensional accident,” Clive said. “I’ve never seen a building like this in person, but I’ve seen recordings. Always in extreme environments.”

“I think it’s safe to call this massive underground chamber full of elemental power an extreme environment,” Neil said.

“There is a construction technique,” Valetta explained, “for establishing buildings in extreme environments. Underwater is the most common.”

“Like that village under Sky Scar Lake, near Greenstone,” Clive said. “That was modest compared to this massive building, but they still probably portalled in materials rather than carting them down through the water.”

“For more involved builds and more extreme environments,” Valetta continued, “building sections are pre-fabricated for rapid assembly. Then they’re then brought to the location in dimensional spaces or through portals.”

“But some extreme environments,” Belinda said, gesturing at the space around them, “aren’t friendly to dimension magic.”

“Precisely,” Valetta said. “If the dimensional magic goes wrong in just the right way, you get something like this.”

“Most likely what the first smoulders to arrive here brought with them,” Miriam said.

The conversation ended as Beaufort returned.

“We’re heading in,” he said. “Most members of our groups will be placed in one of the ready areas used for quick mobilisation. I’ll be taking your leadership to meet with that of the brightheart smoulders right away.”

The group landed on a set of three clustered balconies, none individually large enough for the whole group. The expedition went to one and the cult to a second. Beaufort and the expedition leadership, Miriam, Jason and Clive, landed on the third. The larger groups were escorted into the citadel by wary guards while the leaders were guided by just one, a smoulder named Marla.



Jason got a close-up look at more brightheart smoulders as they moved towards the upper levels of the citadel. Normal smoulders were all fire-aspected, their eyes and often hair reflecting this. Their skin markings normally stayed subdued. All of that was prone to change with essences and racial gifts, and the brighthearts all demonstrated this to some degree.

The skin of the brighthearts remained the traditional obsidian black while their other features changed with elemental affinity. Iron and Ash were usually shades of dull grey while fire and magma glowed brightly. Fire aspects were the most common, although they were also the most likely to have their skin markings lit up.

Marla seemed to have a less common affinity, her aura radiating strong metal energy while her characteristic features glowed red-orange. That was striking enough on her eyes and skin markings, but the effect on her hair was flabbergasting. In a world where magic made everyone beautiful, she was one of those that truly stood apart, like Sophie, Rufus and Zara.

Marla led Jason and the others towards the upper reaches of the citadel. Their route was far from direct but Jason didn't think they were getting the run-around. The issue was that the citadel's interior was just as bizarre as the outside, if not more so. Corridors zigzagged, the floors awkwardly undulating instead of staying flat. Stairwells led up and back down again without any access to other levels.

The doors were eclectic in design with some doorways simply empty, revealing what was on the other side. Most of the rooms were relatively ordinary, although many had slightly distorted measurements giving them an unnerving optical illusion quality. One room was just a slanted shaft with a rail for some kind of transport set into the wall.

"You must have all manner of stone-shapers down here," Clive said. "Why haven't you fixed this distorted building?"

"This underground realm is called Cardinas," Marla explained as they walked. "This citadel was formed by accident when our ancestors first descended to the natural array. It has been a monument to their early efforts, serving as a museum and school. We also hold government in the upper levels, which is where we are going. Until this crisis, it hadn't served as a residence in centuries."

"What kind of government do you have?" Jason asked.

"We had a ruling council of nine," Marla said. "Three were elected from the gold-rankers, three from the normal-rankers and three from the guilds. Now only Lorenn remains, the others having sacrificed everything to keep the rest of us alive. She is the

last, and the burden lies heavy. I ask that you address her as Councilwoman Lorenn or just Councilwoman.”

“I’m sorry to ask such a grim question,” Miriam said, “but how many of your people are left?”

“Fewer than ten thousand, now. Less than one in twenty of what we had before the messengers came, but even this many we struggle to feed. Aside from the citadel chamber, we have only two growth halls remaining. The growth halls are where we grow our food and purify the air. Most of our remaining citizens have advanced to iron rank and can sustain themselves on elements other than air. Most of the others died as our remaining growth halls were overtaxed and the air grew too thin. The children and the elderly were the first to…”

“Don’t,” Miriam said in half a sob. “I am sorry for asking such a thing.”

Jason paled at the thought of watching thousands die as the air grew too thin, most of the population gasping desperately through their final moments. For all the horrors Jason had been through, he realised these people were going through worse. A society without children was a society without hope.

“Many of the children live still,” Marla said. “We’ve moved them to the growth chambers where the air is strongest.”

Unbreathable air was no impediment to the expedition members who were all silver-rank and above. The air underground would have killed them long before they reached the bottom of the shaft otherwise.

“If most of our people hadn’t died,” Marla continued, “we would have starved by now. We are rationing heavily but we’ve already seen the first starvation deaths. We can’t sustain ourselves on spirit coins like you surface people, and they can’t be created from the magic here anyway. We grow moss, fungus and other plants that thrive on the heat of magma vents. They take on elemental properties that sustain us very well. Or did, when we had enough growth halls for all. But they were the places the messenger tree claimed first.”

Jason had more questions about the tree but couldn’t bring himself to ask. The three adventurers all had pained expressions, shoulders tensing and fists balling. Beaufort was fine. It reminded Jason that the cultist had the same name as Thadwick Mercer’s father. Beaufort Mercer wasn’t a villain like his namesake or his son, although the trio did share a significant deficit of empathy.

Marla led them to a large room where a horseshoe-shaped conference desk curved around a model that floated in the air. It looked to be made of coloured sand that Jason

realised must depict the full underground realm. It was a surprisingly vast network of chambers and tunnels, although most of the map was obscured by a green glow. The largest chamber, which showed the shaft leading out through the top, was shrouded in darkness. One small chamber stood out, having a shifting glow of warm colours, reds, oranges and yellows. The only areas of the map not obscured were at one end. One chamber had a very clear depiction of the citadels, while two chambers branched off from it.

Waiting for the group was a weary-looking brightheart with the washed-out markings of an ash type. Having come close enough to sense a few of the smoulder now, he could tell them apart with his magical senses. The differences were much like those between the elemental messengers, although the comparison only went so far. The elemental messengers felt corrupted and twisted while, in the brightheart, that power felt natural and balanced. The woman got up from where she had been sitting at the desk, going over lists spread out in front of her.

"I am Lorenn," she said as she moved around the long desk to greet them. "You, I understand it, are Beaufort's enemies."

She paused, sensing something, and narrowed hostile eyes on Jason.

"You're like them," she accused.

"In some ways," Jason said, realised she meant that he shared the gestalt nature of the messengers. "But, in some ways, so are you."

Lorenn gave him a long look, their eyes locked as no one said anything. Finally, she nodded.

"They are a mockery of what we are," she said. "I suppose they are a mockery of what you are as well. I was not expecting the leadership of the group Beaufort was so insistent on retrieving to have more silver-rankers than gold. Although he assures us you are dangerous, I hope you understand I was hoping for more."

"I won't bother trying to convince you with words," Jason told her. "You'll see our actions soon enough. My name is Jason Asano, operations commander for this expedition. This is my tactical commander, Miriam Vance, and our magical expert, Clive Standish."

"Do not underestimate Asano or Standish," Beaufort told her. "They may be silver-rank but they were giving the Builder black eyes at iron and bronze-rank. The surface messengers have marked them both as personal threats as well."

"Wait, what?" Clive asked. "Since when do the messengers know me by name?"

“Clive, you’re the bloke neck deep in messenger magic with that study trove,” Jason pointed out. “You know more about the messenger device than they’d like and we didn’t clear out all the spies until right before we left.”

“Oh, great,” Clive said.

“So long as you can do something about the elemental messengers,” Lorenn said, “I don’t care what you are.”

“Dealing with them is why we’re here,” Miriam said.

“No,” Clive disagreed. “It’s not. We came here because the natural array has become unstable. Councilwoman Lorenn, I presume you are aware that the core aspect of your people’s predicament is the disruption of the natural array by the messengers.”

“Yes,” she said. “This citadel chamber is the site of the echo array, a powerful artefact that allows us to affect the array. We have been using the echo array to fight the corruption of the natural array by the messengers and their tree, but we have only been able to slow it, not stop it.”

“We know little,” Clive continued. “Most of our information on your people is just guesswork. One of those guesses is that the natural array is central to your civilisation, and the power that transformed your ancestors.”

“That is an accurate assessment,” Lorenn told him.

“At the risk of being insensitive,” Clive told her, “are you aware that the natural array is likely beyond salvaging?”

“It would be strange to come back from what has happened,” Lorenn said. “We have accepted that with our minds, but doing so with our hearts is more difficult. The array has been the centre of our society from the beginning. Cardinas, our civilisation, is only possible because of it. It is responsible for not just who we are but what we are. For many of our people, accepting its loss will be one source of despair too many. But the truth is, it is lost, whether we accept that or not.”

“Most likely,” Clive said.

“To be open and honest,” Jason said, “We are here to neutralise the threat of the natural array. The odds of doing that by restoring it to its original condition are close enough to nil as to make no difference. We have forged something of an uneasy alliance with the messengers — the regular ones on the surface, not the ones you have here. Like the Builder cult, they are our enemies. We hope that the cultists are more honest with their dealings, though, as we know the messengers are working against us for their own ends.”

“The messengers want to turn your array into something called a soul forge,” Clive said. “They cannot do it alone as this place corrupts them.”

“So they struck a false bargain with us,” Jason said. “Send us here with a device they claim will stabilise the array. We believe it will finish the job the messengers started when they first came here and change the array into a soul forge.”

“Or that’s the intention,” Clive said. “They may have gotten this attempt as wrong as the first.”

“But if it does work, they intend to take it somehow,” Jason said. “Then kill me and probably leave the rest of you to your fates.”

“Why you?” Lorenn asked.

“Let’s sit,” Jason said. “We can introduce ourselves and explain everything from the beginning. And then we would like to hear about things from your end.”

He glanced at Beaufort.

“Both of your ends.”

## Chapter 771

### The Impossible

Jason, Clive and Miriam sat in the council chamber with Beaufort and the two brighthearts, Lorenn and Marla. The adventurers explained the Builder invasion, the messenger invasion and the expedition. Some of it Lorenn had already learned from Beaufort, although it was clear his explanation had been coloured differently in certain parts.

Beaufort then took his turn to recount the cult's story. It amounted to invading Cardinas but having no interest in the natural array. Instead, they fought their way into the local astral space, which was a rather unique one. Where other portal effects were disrupted by the array, the astral space aperture was extremely solid. Clive postulated that the astral space had formed alongside the array and could be the key to understanding how to stabilise it.

"I'm going to need to study that astral space," he said. "Trying anything without understanding how it relates to the array would be foolhardy. The failure to do so may be what went wrong with the messenger's attempts to hijack the array in the first place."

"That won't be easy," Lorenn said. "The astral space aperture is unclaimed by the messenger tree, which cannot tolerate its power, but we are cut off from it."

Marla stood up and moved around the horseshoe desk to the floating model of Cardinas in the middle. She pointed out the chamber that glowed with shifting red, yellow and orange light.

"This is the astral space chamber. You see how it's cut off from us by messenger-held territory but remains unclaimed. The energy there repels the messenger tree somehow. We don't know much else as we only have access to this projection, created by the echo array. If the chamber falls, it will be marked by the green, which represents the tree's domain."

Beaufort continued his story. The cult had been fighting for access to the astral space and the arrival of the messengers had been their opportunity. The brighthearts had been scrambling to react to a second incursion and the messengers quickly became the priority. The natural array was sacred to the brighthearts, and while the cult had ignored it, the messengers aimed straight for it. The brighthearts refocused their defenders on the messengers and the cultists were able to make their way into the astral space and seal it off from the inside.

“Our plan from this point was the usual,” Beaufort explained. “Use our astral magic to sever the astral space from this universe so the Builder could claim it. It didn’t work. The astral space proved a little too unique and our astral magic didn’t work.”

“Didn’t you have people capable of adapting it?” Clive asked.

“Our people can use the magic,” Beaufort said, “but our magic users have only so much expertise. Much of the magic required is built into the artificial components of their bodies. They don’t fully understand the magic they’re using.”

Clive let out an exasperated groan.

“Mr Standish,” Miriam said. “I would appreciate it if you didn’t bemoan a lack of competence in our enemies.”

“I’m just so sick of it,” Clive complained as he ran his hands over his face. “Why is everyone so stupid?”

“That’s a little hurtful,” Jason said.

“I’m just saying that if you’re going to use magic, the fundamental energy of the cosmos that is the most powerful and therefore dangerous thing there is, then maybe you should learn how it works before sticking your hand in it and wiggling about.”

“We were trying,” Beaufort said defensively. “We were still working on how to adapt the magic when you, Asano, convinced the Builder to leave this world and take no further astral spaces. We were trapped underground and couldn’t get back to a fortress city on the surface, so we were left stranded.”

Lorenn looked at Jason.

“You forced a great astral being to back off?” she asked him.

“More ‘convinced’ than ‘forced,’” Jason said. “‘Bargained,’ maybe. The Builder and I have a history.”

“So Beaufort has told me. Yet all you tell me are stories of making alliances with your enemies.”

“Yes,” Jason said. “I’ve done it before, and every time it feels like swallowing poison. But sometimes you have to do something ugly to prevent something worse.”

Lorenn nodded.

“That, I understand,” she told him. “As the messenger tree overtook more and more of our domain, the Builder cult came to us with an alliance.”

“We were close to being cut off from everything by the elemental messengers,” Beaufort said. “If we weren’t going to claim the astral space, we needed to return to the surface and look for a way to rejoin the Builder. The elemental messengers had control of

the tunnel the messengers had dug, and those regular messengers were waiting at the top. As for our digging machines, the brightheart had long destroyed them.”

“Last I checked, you and the regular messengers were allies,” Jason pointed out.

“An alliance based on usefulness and power. If we handed ourselves over to the messengers now that the Builder is gone, we would have no leverage. The messengers would only accept us as slaves, yet we would not be acceptable slaves to them. They only take slaves who are broken and have accepted messenger superiority.”

“I’m familiar with their practices,” Jason said. “They wouldn’t take you because of your loyalty to the Builder.”

“Yes. There are no forcibly converted amongst my people. We sacrificed those in the early fighting against the brighthearts. All who remain are true servants. None would be acceptable slaves, so the messengers would kill us. That left the other tunnel up, where the Adventure Society is waiting. I know they will likely kill us as well, but we at least have a chance at survival. I bet the lives of my people on mercy. Your mercy, Jason Asano.”

Jason grimaced.

“Your boss told you to try that, didn’t he?”

“The Lord Builder observes you still,” Beaufort admitted. “He saw a weakness and told me to exploit it.”

“You openly admit it?” Miriam asked.

“He knows it doesn’t matter,” Jason said, not taking his eyes off Beaufort. “If my mercy was so fragile that the Builder’s opinion could break it, it’s not worth relying on. He also knows that what waits for them on the surface isn’t good. Letting them live isn’t the same as setting them free.”

“The cultists are detestable,” Lorenn said. “It was not an easy choice to accept them, but we are not warriors. Our losses against the cult and then the messengers showed us this. Until the invaders came and the array was disrupted, no monsters attacked our chambers. The elementals were placid, even working with us in the forges and construction yards and growth chambers. We had known nothing but century after century of peace. We needed the Builder cult to teach us war.”

She turned a cold gaze on Beaufort.

“They taught us. Fought for us. But we do not forget why they came here in the first place, or how many they killed before they started protecting us.”

Lorenn and Marla told them the story of their people, starting with the Builder invasion. Much of that had been covered by Beaufort and she focused on the messengers. They had arrived in the midst of the brighthearts already fighting a war they were not



expecting or ready for. The messengers punched their way directly into the most sacred space in Cardinas, the natural array chamber, and worked their terrible magic.

The results went horribly awry. The messengers fled, many of them left behind as their own failed workings twisted and corrupted them. The damage had been done, however, and worse than the messengers themselves was the tree they left behind in the natural array chamber.

“After the cult joined us we made one attempt to purge the tree when the messenger numbers were still low. We reached the chamber, and that is the only time we saw the tree itself, a twisted, ugly thing. But we failed to take the chamber back. The gold-rank messengers were too strong. That was the beginning of the true days of horror.”

She paused, a pained expression on her face.

“The tree roots burrowed through stone to invade the rest of our domain. The growth chambers were first. We didn’t know why until we realised it was taking anything that was or had once been alive.”

“Organic matter,” Jason said. “Using it as base material to make more messengers?”

“Yes,” Marla confirmed. “It seems to prefer plants, but meat will do. The tree’s roots spread and the messengers grew in number. Our every loss was their gain. The main city chamber was where we made our stand. Without it, and the growth chambers attached to it, most of our people would die.”

“And die they did,” Lorenn said. “We, so far as I know, are all the brighthearts that exist. Almost all of us died in three cycles.”

“A cycle is their equivalent of days,” Beaufort explained.

“We thought it was over,” Lorenn said. “With that many bodies, the messengers would be countless. And their numbers did grow, as you saw. But something about all that death took a turn. The bodies were tainted and started to rise. Spiritual remnants appeared; echoes of departed souls mirrored by death magic. The roots withdrew and a gulf of death opened between us and the messengers. This chamber, and the two growth chambers attached to it, are on the far side of the main chamber from everything else.”

“The roots couldn’t grow around?” Miriam asked.

“It seems not,” Lorenn said. “We suspect the expanded distance is too far from the natural array.”

“Or maybe the tree didn’t think of it,” Jason said. “Trees aren’t known for their developed problem-solving skills.”

“The messengers made some attempts to cross the death chamber and attack us,” Marla said. “They failed. We can hold them at the gates long enough that they draw too many of the dead and are forced to withdraw.”

“Eventually they seemed to give up,” Beaufort said. “That was when they started digging the shaft up to the surface and you know what happened from there. Their initial scouting party to the surface didn’t come back and they’ve been quiet since. Until you showed up. We believe they were consolidating in preparation to move up in force, processing the organic matter they’d already taken and spawning as many of their kind as they could. I knew you were coming because the Builder warned us. When the messengers started swarming up the shaft, we knew you were close.”

“What I would have liked to do,” Jason said, “is evacuate everyone. Write off the expedition, get all the brighthearts out and then say to hell with it and evacuate Yaresh. Let the natural array explode and take the messengers with it. But I don’t think it’s that simple anymore.”

“We’re fairly certain that the surface messengers have sent people other than us down here,” Miriam said. “Some of their own kind that already had elemental powers and can resist being corrupted. More importantly, the god of Destruction has taken an interest.”

“I don’t think Destruction’s goal is to make sure the array blows up,” Jason said. “I think his goal is the tree. I think he wants it to become some kind of apocalypse beast that devours every living thing on this planet. Even just doing a vast amount of damage before it gets stopped would satisfy him.”

“What we’re saying is that we can’t leave the array alone,” Miriam said. “We have to deal with it and then we can *all* go to the surface.”

“Losing the array is a blow our people may not recover from,” Lorenn said. “We have already lost so much. But I have accepted that if we are going to last as a people, we need to leave our home behind.”

“And we’ll take you,” Jason said, then inclined his head at Beaufort. “We’ll even take them. But the array must be dealt with. As for your people, I had an idea of how we could maybe do something for them. I can’t promise anything, but we can at least look into it.”

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Clive had left Miriam and Jason to strategy while he worked on exploring whether Jason's idea was viable. Roped into helping were the Magic Society research team and some of the brightheart magic experts. Along with a staggering understanding of elemental magic, they understood how to manipulate the echo array that could, in turn, influence the

natural array. He'd been given a large room along with all the magic supplies that the expedition, the brightheart and even the cult could muster.

"The idea," Clive explained, "is to create an area where the elemental energy that pervades the magic here is excluded. We'll be running some viability tests, but the basic premise is to use the messenger device to isolate the elemental aspects within a small area and absorb them with the excellent elemental mana lamps our new brightheart colleagues have provided."

"We're trying to create a space where we can open a portal?" asked a member of the Magic Society group.

"We are," Clive confirmed. "Opening a portal to the surface most likely won't be an option, though. Transportation portals are the most susceptible to elemental interference, and we won't be able to completely excise the elemental energy. We're hoping to make our dimensional storage useable and pull out all the supplies we were forced to stash."

He panned a stern gaze over the group, lingering on the brighthearts.

"What I'm going to tell you next stays in this room. I know that Marla has already explained the need for secrecy, so I won't harp any further. We are going to try and establish this portal viability zone to evacuate the civilian population."

"That's not possible," one of the brighthearts said. "Portals have limits and opening and closing enough of them to move ten thousand people would turn the most carefully refined ambient magic zone into pure turbulence."

"Correct," Clive said.

"Then what aren't you telling us?" the brightheart asked. "For one thing, where would the portal lead? You just said yourself that transportation portals won't work, and I haven't heard about any other underground cities nearby. Are you looking to send the whole population into the astral space? That's not an environment that most of the population will survive for long."

"All true," Clive agreed.

"And even if you got portals working, enough of them in quick succession would undo any preparation we made to balance out the ambient magic. It would only work if you had one portal that could stay open and accept any number of people through it."

"Yes," Clive said.

"If all you're going to do is stand there and agree that everything you want to do is impossible, then what are we doing here?"

"The impossible, obviously," Clive said.

## Chapter 772

### Everything in My Power

Despite being deep underground, the growth chamber was filled with light. Level after level of stone lattices and catwalks were overgrown with luminescent flora creating a glorious light show. Jason's soul realm had underground areas with glowing fungus but this place put them to shame. Moss, vines and fungal growth climbed over everything, shedding light in every shade of the rainbow to weave a kaleidoscopic tapestry.

Miniature aqueducts carried water down through the chamber in a complex series of troughs and channels. Water could be seen running off the edge of troughs to splash down in pools that emptied into more channels, spraying up mist in the process. That mist spread out, floating through the chamber to leave the abundant flora with a patina of dew.

"I never imagined something like this down here," Jason said, his voice filled with wonder. "How does it work when the magic here is filled with fire and magma affinity? Where does the water come from, all the way down here? That's magic making it mist that way, yes?"

He was walking through the growth chamber with Lorenn, the leader of the brightheart people. Three of her aides travelled a respectful distance behind.

"You are aware of what a natural array is?" Lorenn asked.

"A bunch of essences, awakening stones and quintessence that just happened to manifest over time in such a way that complex magical interactions are generated."

"Yes. While most of the components of the array are fire, earth, ash and similar types, at the heart of the array there are three essences that create balance. One plant, one life and one water essence. You are no doubt wondering how such essences could manifest so far underground."

"That's exactly what I was wondering, yes."

"Our scholars theorise that these were the final elements of the array to manifest. The idea is that the rest of the array was in place and the components were already interacting, and that created a magic imbalance. As more magic manifested, that imbalance created an environment where those manifestations took forms that rectified that imbalance. There's a wellspring of water that is conjured into being underneath the array and passes through natural tunnels in the stone, ending up in the growth chambers."

"So, these growth chambers formed naturally, rather than being dug out?" Jason asked.

“Originally, yes, although we expanded them all. The citadel chamber and the growth chambers were the only natural ones, although we expanded them all. The pillars in the citadel chamber were already there, although they were solid when our ancestors found them. After the citadel was rather disastrously brought into being in the middle of them, they were hollowed out, reinforced and shaped. That was where most of our people lived until our population grew and we eventually created the Great Chamber.”

“How did that work?” Jason asked. “Where was all that rock displaced to?”

“It was used to fill the tunnel our ancestors used to arrive here in the first place. They came in not straight down but at a long angle from the west to avoid the people in the surface region directly above us. Our people had discovered the natural array and wanted to build a home around it. They feared those without elements in their blood would see only something to be exploited, so we reached this place with the elves above never even realising.”

“I’m pretty sure that was the right call,” Jason said.

“The opening of the Great Chamber was the beginning of our peak as a civilisation,” she said proudly, then bowed her head. Her voice became a mournful whisper.

“We call it the death chamber now.”

Jason grimaced.

“I am left in awe at what you’ve accomplished here,” he said. “Hanging gardens of light hidden impossibly deep underground. Even in a world of magic, this place is a wonder. But it feels wrong to take joy in what you’ve made here when your people are surviving on the ragged edge.”

“Do you truly believe that you can help us?” Lorenn asked.

“That’s the plan,” Jason said, doing his best to offer a reassuring smile. “Once you’ve saved the world a few times, you start to wonder what’s next. Saving whole species makes sense.”

Lorenn raised her eyebrows sceptically.

“I know I can come off as flippant,” Jason said apologetically. “But while my manner might sometimes make it seem otherwise, I promise my actions are undertaken with the utmost seriousness. I will do everything in my power to help your people. And between you and me, that is a lot of power.”

“You’ll have to forgive my doubts,” Lorenn said. “It’s hard to imagine a silver-ranker saving us all. What you describe doing seems... unlikely.”

“I know. It took me a long time to get used to it as well. As for addressing your doubts, would you be willing to take a look at my aura if I completely opened it up to you? I don’t know how sensitive the aura senses of your people are.”

“Not as sharp as an essence user,” Lorenn said, “but adequate. My understanding is that our ability to sense magic rather than auras is stronger, especially with elemental magic.”

“That makes sense. I’m going to open up my soul, so please take a look. You’ll have to push your senses in because I don’t want to expose everyone else here in the chamber. It would probably kill some of the children.”

Lorenn raised her eyebrows again and Jason gave her a wry smile.

“You’ll see.”

He felt her senses make an exploratory push into his aura and opened a gate in the restraints every essence user employed to hold back their auras. He watched Lorenn's eyes grow wider as she explored the strange and twisty depths of the power that reflected Jason's soul. He smiled until her expression turned from shock to horror.

“What are you?” she half-whispered as she withdrew her senses.

“Ouch. I’m in a transitional period. But you sensed the power, right? I can’t whip it out and slap people in the face with it, but it’s impressive to look at. Well, I suppose I can, kind of. My aura is only an echo of that power, but even that is enough to be used as a weapon.”

“This place you said you can take my people. You called it a soul realm.”

“I’ve called it a lot of things. But yeah.”

“And this soul realm is yours.”

“Yes.”

“Meaning that it is shaped by what I just saw?”

“Strictly speaking, what you just saw is shaped by it. But more or less, yes.

Councilwoman, I want to be clear about what I’m proposing before we move forward. The soul realm isn’t just some dimensional space that’s influenced by my soul. It is my soul. If your people enter it, they’ll be inside my soul. Which means, amongst other things, that they will be completely in my power. It doesn’t matter if they’re gold-rank, or what abilities they wield. The moment they arrive, my power over them becomes absolute, utter and inescapable. I could kill them in an instant or trap them there for eternity.”

“Are you trying to convince me to not do this?”

“I just want you to understand exactly what you’re leading your people into. I’m essentially asking you to put the fate of your entire people in the hands of someone you’ve

known for all of a few hours. Someone who could easily annihilate them once you have. That's not a revelation I want you having when half of your people are already in my soul realm and some kind of riot starts."

"But do we genuinely have a choice?" Lorenn asked. "If we're choosing between no chance of survival and betting everything on a stranger, that's not a choice at all."

"You could wait it out. Hope we can beat the messengers and lead you all out of here."

"But you think we'll all get dragged into this transformation zone you talked about."

"Yes," Jason said. "I think this whole underground region will be dragged into the fragmented dimensional space that is going to form, and everyone here with it. But if your people are in my soul, they'll be protected. Not to mention having air to breathe and food to eat. Which brings us to the reason we're here."

Lorenn nodded, then waved to the aides trailing them. Two were bronze-rank while the third was a silver who approached in response to Lorenn's gesture.

"You want samples of all the plants we have here," Lorenn said to Jason.

"Yes," he said, nodding his confirmation. "I can reproduce the plants in here. Organics are a lot trickier than inert material, though. I'll need as much information to understand what I'm dealing with as I can get. My understanding is that your people need food rich not just in magic but magic with a high elemental affinity."

"We don't strictly need it, but it's vastly more efficient. Our normal and iron-rankers can get by on ordinary food. Our bronze-rankers as well, although they need a lot of it. We wouldn't have had nearly enough for everyone if that's what we were using. There may also be some sickness if it's not elementally rich, especially given how weak and starving our population is."

"I can work with that," Jason assured her. "To make sure I can produce what you need, what I need are samples of everything, and not just of the plants. The soil, the stone, the water. Any fertiliser and anything else you use. The more accurately I can replicate this growth chamber, the better I'll be able to produce food that will sustain your people. The further I am from understanding their needs, the longer it will take to figure out how to produce something they can consume without exacerbating any issues."

"This is Hilda," Lorenn said, introducing the aide. "She'll see to it that you get what you need."

Hilda was a magma type, her hair a mix of obsidian black and glowing orange. Her eyes and skin markings shifted between glossy black and glowing orange in a slow, heartbeat pulse. She looked young to Jason's eyes, around twenty or even younger, which

was highly impressive for silver-rank. He knew that rank and species difference could easily be fooling him, but her aura had a feel to it he associated with youth.

“I greet you, Lord Asano,” she said.

“Oh, none of that,” Jason said. “I’m not even Lord of the Dance, although I can twinkle my toes when the occasion calls for it. I’m Jason. Call me that and we’ll get on just fine. Unless you’re a terrible person or something, which would be unfortunate. I’m sure you’re great.”

“I’m going to go,” Lorenn told Jason. “I’ve been away from my duties too long as it is. Hilda, I was told by Mr Asano’s companions that if he starts getting... odd, I should just nod and wait for him to finish, then only address anything that actually made sense. I pass that advice on to you.”

“Who told you that?” Jason asked. “It was Clive, wasn’t it? He was the one that came with us to meet you.”

“Before I go,” Lorenn said, ignoring Jason’s questions, “I do have a concern about something you’ve told me here. If this soul realm is actually within your soul, what happens to the people in it when you die?”

“Die permanently? I honestly have no idea.”

Jason moved away from Hilda and tapped a pin in his robes, activating a privacy screen in which Lorenn moved to join him.

“I have a couple of deaths in me before we have to worry about what happens to the people in my soul.”

“A couple of deaths?”

“You know how vampires work? Feeding on life force they can use to recover even from what should be thoroughly lethal injuries?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’m kind of like that, except I devour the life force of messengers and use it to resurrect myself. It takes a lot of them to get a whole resurrection’s worth, but the one thing we’re not short on down here is messengers. My concerns are failing, not dying.”

“You are a strange creature, Jason Asano.”

“So people tell me. I’d appreciate you keeping the resurrection thing to yourself, by the way. I normally only share those details with my closest companions, but with the trust you’ll need to put in me, I think you deserve some trust in return. It’s the only assurance I have to offer.”

“Then I thank you for that.”

Lorenn departed, leaving Jason with Hilda.



“What quantities are you going to need for each of your samples?” Hilda asked him.

“Well, for the plants I’ll need one full plant of each type, including root systems and whatever it’s growing out of. I noticed that some of your plants look to be growing straight out of the rock...”

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Clive and his ritualists were confident they could create a zone where Jason could open his portal but were unsure how long they could maintain it. With almost ten thousand people to move, from across three chambers, getting them to the portal would be a massive logistical challenge.

The bottom of the citadel chamber, amongst the pillars, was chosen as the portal site. It was the easiest place to funnel people from the growth chambers, and those in the citadel chamber would only need to descend, not climb their way up. Even so, the citadel chamber posed several challenges, the biggest being the citadel itself.

The citadel wasn’t well designed for one person to navigate, let alone thousands at once. More historical artefact than functional building, the only practical way to move from the upper pillar to the lower was a series of elevating platforms that moved around the outside of the building. They were not even close to sufficient to move the numbers required in a short time frame.

The pillars faced similar, but less urgent issues. They all had elevating-platform shafts, along with stairwells, but they were not designed to move the entire populace all at once. One bad incident when every level of the stairs was packed with people could spell disaster.

The decision was made to take the time to get the populace down to ground level, lined up and ready to go before the portal was opened. The major risk was what happened if the portal couldn’t take everyone at once and there was a lengthy break as the elemental energy was purged again. As more and more people arrived at ground level, it increasingly became a sports arena with no food stands and no public bathrooms.

Jason watched proceedings from the air, sitting in his cloud chair. He sighed.

“A lot of people are going to poop in my soul.”