

Chapter 851

You Know It's Trouble

Two tunnels linked the realm of the brighthearts with the surface of Pallimustus. Both had been cut off by the transformation zone, and both were now open again. One tunnel had been dug by the messengers for their first attempt to turn the natural array into a soul forge, triggering the subsequent disasters.

The messengers had been monitoring the tunnel, no longer impacted by the power of the natural array that had corrupted them into mindless berserkers. When the transformation zone vanished they had poured down in search of answers, only to swiftly retreat.

What they found was a glassy smooth shaft of black crystal, shaped into a perfect cylinder hundreds of metres across. Blue and orange eyes had lit up the moment they entered, firing beams of blue disruptive force and orange resonating force. Worse were the afflictions that started infesting their body, turning pristine feathers and flesh into black rot. Added to the elemental forces of the natural array, easily felt in the shaft, and it was clear no messengers would find safe passage.

The second tunnel had a town where it met the surface, rapidly constructed through collaboration between the Adventure Society and Magic Society. At the bottom of the hole was an outpost occupied by a gathering of powerful adventurers and other interested parties. Various governments from the surface were represented, as were numerous organisations and associations, including many churches. There were also agents from opportunistic merchant cartels, curious noble houses and other parties of varying legitimacy.

When the rainbow barrier of the transformation zone vanished, it was not long before people were pouring down a shaft identical to the one savaging messengers at that very moment. Priests, adventurers and magical researchers moved alongside the agents of noble houses, criminal enterprises and merchants hoping to turn boldness into spirit coins.

There was a clear hierarchy in the descent through the shaft, aligning exactly along the lines of power. At the front were Raythe and Velius, the peak diamond-rankers from beyond Pallimustus. Then came the handful of other diamond-rankers, including Allayeth. She had not been waiting at the outpost, but word travelled fast and diamond-rankers travelled faster.

The gold-rankers came next, but that was where the jostling for primacy began. It was rare to see so many gold-rankers outside of a monster surge, and rarer to have them

moving as one. Priests and officials of powerful and legitimate forces jockeyed for position. Gwydion Remore took his cue from Danielle Geller and let others go ahead, hanging back ahead of the silver-rankers.

The shaft was not as hostile to the group as the other was to the messengers, but it was far from welcoming. Blue and orange nebulous eyes appeared on the walls like liquid behind glass. They followed the group as it descended through the shaft, imposing a growing sense of trespass on the people moving down.

That sense affected some more than others. Gwydion felt nothing at all while Danielle felt an aura that was familiar, but profoundly changed from the last time she had felt it. Most of the others showed different levels of unease, from discomfort to fear. Those driven by avarice, opportunism and malice felt as if the eyes of a god were watching them. Raythe and Velius showed no reaction to whatever they were feeling beyond sharing a quick glance.

For some, the sense of unease and trespass grew stronger. Many amongst the silver-rankers turned back, shooting up the tunnel with a sense of having escaped some unseen danger. For those that persisted, the eyes on the walls grew more numerous and started tracking individuals.

When afflictions began affecting some of the people, most of them retreated up the shaft. Only a few of the silver-rankers attempted to tough it out, some trying healing or protection magic. It didn't take long for them to realise the futility and flee upwards as well. The eyes tracking them followed them up, pursuing them back to the outpost.

The impacted gold-rankers lasted longer, their protection and cleansing magic more effective. As the group continued downwards, however, it became clear they would not last. They shot back up the shaft, some growled threats at the air before departing.

Around a third of the initial group were forced into retreat, many already planning return attempts. Of those that remained, many were left unsettled by the aura but were, thus far, unharmed. They finally reached the bottom of the shaft.

The new forest city at the centre of Jason's soul realm had a soul of its own. Like Nik, Jason had unconsciously brought it into being with the transformation zone's inception. Unlike Nik, the results were not neat and clean. Nik had been spun from wholecloth, fresh and new as the Healer's gift erased any flaws.

The forest had not been a forest at first, but a single, mountainous tree. A living edifice, mad and hostile. Unlike Nik, it had predated the transformation zone as a corrupted and half-formed thing. The messengers had tried to produce a soul forge from

the natural array and gotten it terribly wrong. The array had created an incomplete soul forge that, in turn, created an incomplete messenger birthing tree. The result was a warped whole in three parts, each reliant on — yet poisonous to — the others.

That mess has gone into the transformation zone, becoming the building blocks for the twisted antagonist at the centre of the zone. The tree, a living product of two unliving things, had developed a soul. Unlike Nik, the results were not divinely-guided perfection. This was a second product, victimised by its corrupt origin and Jason's unknowing influence.

Jason's most laborious task in reintegrating the transformation zone had been untangling the mess that was the tree, the natural array and the soul forge. So far as he could tell, he had managed to bring each to a completed state, allowing them to exist separately and be extracted from one another. They had each become complete without the others and the tree changed most of all, from a single monstrous plant to a living forest city.

The array went back to the brightheart realm; where it came from in the first place and where it belonged. It was part of Jason's spirit domain, but also firmly rooted in a normal universe. The soul forge and the tree were both in Jason's soul realm, which was a reality in and of itself, but a much less stable one.

The results of Jason claiming the soul forge were simple and predictable enough. His soul realm was in the process of breaking down, the astral throne, astral gate and soul forge setting him on the path to becoming an astral king. As for the tree merging with his soul realm, the ramifications would take time to be fully revealed.

The tree's form was the most obvious difference. Instead of a single, mountainous tree, it was a forest spanning from horizon to horizon. Spiritually, the change was far less, with the tree's soul retaining its integrity. While the rest of Jason's soul realm was slowly breaking down, the forest city remained fully intact.

Jason was holding off the process of becoming an astral king, staving off the breakdown of his soul realm outside of the forest city. He needed to make preparations and wanted to say his farewells. He didn't how long it would be before he saw his friends again, and there was one he never would.

Only one portion of the wider soul realm was not in the process of slowly collapsing. High above the forest city was a mountain resting on an island of clouds. At an altitude too high to be seen from the ground, the exterior was frozen and wind-blasted with air too thin in oxygen to breathe. The mountain had been carved into the shape of Jason's head.

Inside, the mountain had been dug out into a complex of giant hallways and cavernous rooms. The construction was dark stone, carved from the mountain, and crude industrial metal. The air was hot, wet and heavy. The lighting came from thick glass pipes that moved in and out of the walls and ceilings or were set into the floor. Glowing magma pumped through the pipes, painting everything in shifting, ominous red.

The magma came from the central feature of the mountain interior: a massive shaft running from above the highest level to under the lowest. A waterfall of magma spilled down through the shaft, not touching the walls. The walls were covered in a mix of small waterfalls that quickly turned to steam, windows into the surrounding rooms and tropical plants growing right out of the stone.

Jason arrived at the lowest level of the complex. It was akin to a grotto or a cenote, but with magma pooling below instead of water. A metal catwalk was bolted to the coarse stone walls, and five heavy iron doors were spaced evenly around the walls. One held an elevating platform that led up to Jason's office. Three of the others led to the astral throne, astral gate and soul forge.

The last, even Jason was unsure where it led. What he did know was that it was the reason the mountain wasn't breaking down like the rest of his soul realm. He also suspected who was responsible for it. He made a casual gesture and the metal door slid slowly aside with a loud, mechanical grinding.

Behind the door was a vast and starry void. Off in the distance, he could see nebulae of blazing colour. The closest was the familiar eye-shape of blue and orange, matching both Jason's eyes and his most alien familiar. Those more distant were of other shapes and colours, only one of which he recognised. He spotted the mountain-shaped nebula belonging to Carmen, an avatar of doom like Gordon.

"This is you, isn't it?" he asked.

Gordon manifested next to him, the orbs around him glowing blue in confirmation.

"Is this the next bit of trouble coming our way?" Jason asked.

Half of the orbs turned orange.

"You don't know if it's trouble?"

The orbs all turned orange.

"Oh," Jason said. "You know it's trouble; you just don't know if it's next."

The orbs turned blue.

"That's what I thought."

Jason tilted his head, as if listening to something, and sighed.

"Just what I did not need: house guests."

The large group reached the bottom of the shaft in darkness. The glowing eyes on the walls were no longer present, having chased the now-departed members of the group back up the shaft. Danielle guessed that it was feelings of hostility or exploitative desires that triggered the defences, and was curious as to how accurate that detection was. If it could accurately sense such feelings in the auras of the diamond-rankers, that was impressive, and likely to make said diamond-rankers angry. Most were centuries past anyone being able to peek at their feelings.

Seeing in the dark was not an issue for this group. They had all known they were heading underground, so those without appropriate powers had picked up magic items instead. Seeing through non-magical darkness was not expensive to overcome by adventurer standards.

The bottom of the shaft was smooth and glossy, like the walls. Being a mother, Danielle smirked as she idly imagined how easily it would pick up grubby little fingerprints. Neither Humphrey nor Henrietta had been shy about playing in the dark, rich dirt of the Greenstone delta.

There were two doors set into the wall, both dark metal and both closed. One was the size of normal double doors while the other was freight-warehouse sized. The larger door slid open, revealing a long hallway, wide and tall. It curved off into the distance, beyond which some light source offered at least a little illumination.

Some of the group started moving forward, but the moment they did, an odd figure manifested in the doorway. It looked like a floating cloak, blacker than midnight, empty save for a single oversized eye in the hood. The eye was blue, orange and nebulous, like those that had chased off some of their group with bleak afflictions.

The figure made no sound, but its presence arrested those who had been moving forward. There was silence as no one knew quite what to do until it was broken by footsteps echoing down the tunnel. The group watched as a single man rounded the curve of the tunnel, making his way towards them in unhurried fashion. Wandering through the tunnel as if strolling through a market, he wore a garish floral shirt, tan shorts and sandals. He had a glass of fruit juice in one hand and was munching on a sandwich held in the other.