

Chapter 681

The Difference in Conviction

Humphrey's second foray into the main force of the summons was markedly different from the first. His Relentless Assault attack has reached such levels of power that his silver-rank sword was breaking apart every dozen or so strikes, the forces passing through it too much for it to endure. It didn't stop Humphrey as he didn't miss a beat, conjuring the sword anew each time and continuing his assault. Every swing of his blade left a monster debilitated or dead, the toughest finding half their body turned into scattered chunks. The weaker ones were reduced to a fine mist, drifting on the air.

While Humphrey was revelling in a level of power he had never imagined, he was fully cognizant that it was a fleeting moment, one that would pass sooner rather than later. Clive's Mana Tide had reached peak output as the spell's duration drew close to the end, while Neil's buff was not a long-term one, even with the duration extended. Most of all, Humphrey had maintained his Relentless Assault to the point that even with multiple significant mana sources and an expanded mana pool, it was becoming too expensive to sustain.

With each swing, a noticeable chunk of his mana pool was emptied. It was like nothing Humphrey had even experienced and he was feeling the strain. Something deeper than exhaustion of his stamina and mana, the meridians that were the pathways of magic in his body were becoming strained. Jason had an affliction that replicated this, making abilities more costly to use, but this was no attack. Humphrey had just overextended the magical matrix, the underlying framework that was the core of his body. All he needed was a good rest, but he wasn't ready to rest yet.

There was also something else, that Humphrey had heard of but never seen. There was so much power piled up on him, from potent boons to a constant influx of shields and healing. Most of all, it was Humphrey's attack. The build-up power was thankfully centred on the sword Humphrey kept swapping out because, like his swords, Humphrey was silver-rank. Even his tenuous connection to the magic of the attack, just enough to guide it, was leaving him shaky. If he was the main conduit, rather than the weapon, that much power would break him down. And unlike his sword, his body couldn't just be conjured fresh. That was more Jason's area.

The accumulated power of Humphrey's special attack had started to feel unstable to the point that others were notice more than just how much power it had built up.

“Humphrey,” Clive warned through voice chat, although the signal was patchy with so much magic around them. “If the magic comes close to triggering a backlash, just let it go. Silver-rank magic becomes extremely volatile if it reaches gold-rank and might do something?”

“Something?” Sophie asked.

“It’s magic,” Clive told her. “It’s inherently unpredictable. People like me work very hard to take small parts of it and make them predictable.”

“Tell that to Jason’s aura,” Neil said. “Humphrey’s like the Jason’s aura of hitting people right now.”

“You’re making my point,” Clive. “Look at how wrecked Jason always ends up after one of his stunts. Do you want to be lying around for three months? Do want to die? Because that’s kind of his thing, and not all of us come back from the dead recreationally.”

“It’s not a hobby,” Jason complained through voice chat. “That’s just something I tell people.”

“I thought you were busy,” Belinda said to him.

“I am, but I still have time to defend my...crap, no I don’t.”

He started yelling through voice chat.

“Stop eye-beaming my butterflies, you messenger prick! I’m going tear your head off, shove it up the other end and watch you eyebeam your own insides! Then I’m going to drag you over to that monster with the one antler sticking out of it’s forehead and... wait, *is* that an antler? That can’t be a... oh, that isn’t right. That is not right. Who summoned that? There might be kids watching this battle, you depraved pricks! Humphrey, this monster has a big, multi-pronged—”

Humphrey muted the chat channel with a thought as he kept fighting.

Sophie, like Humphrey, was deep inside the monster torrent. After the lengthy fighting they’d done, she had finally built up enough power to be a genuine threat, while being even more elusive and harder to kill than ever. She was no match for Humphrey’s power, but at that stage there was no match for Humphrey’s power at silver-rank.

She was pinballing between messengers, trying to disrupt them from controlling the summons. If she could break their concentration enough, it would buy the defenders much-needed time to thin the monsters out.

Neil, Belinda and Clive were still in Onslow’s shell, floating around the outer edge of the horde. Belinda had conjured a massive, flat metal plate, hooked onto the underside of Onslow’s shell. She had then cast her Pit of the Reaper ability on it, facing down. The ability created a pit that was not a hole but a dimensional space, which could be placed on

anything roughly level, even the surface of still water. Belinda's custom-conjured plate was a purpose-built surface, sized just right. Shadowy tentacles reached from the pit like a nightmare kraken, snatching anyone or anything that got too close to Onslow's shell and wasn't part of the team. The monsters quickly realised that too close was a significant radius as many of them were dragged into the darkness of the pit. Despite it being upside down, nothing dragged in fell back out, only tentacles re-emerging in search of fresh meat.

The rest of the team were far from idle. Neil was concentrating on Humphrey who, despite being so powerful Clive was worried he would explode, was still being hammered by monsters. He was throwing out shields and healing as fast as he could while dumping mana into his Reels of Fortune as fast as they would take it, trying not to waste the mana coming in from Clive's spell. He knew that once the Mana Tide was over, he would miss the near-infinite stream it had become.

Belinda's tentacle pit snatched monsters out of the sky and dragged them into the void where they suffered massive necrotic damage. Each time the duration ended, the pit spat out whatever was left of the monsters that had been dragged in. Some two thirds survived, at least until she cast the spell again and they were drawn back inside.

Even with the fake death kraken plucking monsters out of the sky, the sheer density of monsters meant that Onslow's shell came under constant barrage. Clive had used ritual magic to enhance the wind barrier surrounding the shell and powers launched from the glowing runes marked on it. Each one launched fire, lightning, a hailstorm or some other elemental power, the runes fading as each was expended to produce an attack. Clive constantly restored them with his own overflowing mana, allowing Onslow to keep up the barrage.

Belinda didn't just use her Pit of the Reaper spell, which she had no need to supervise. She used her two tether powers on the top of Onslow's shell, leaving the enemy with an unpleasant situation. Force Tether dragged enemies towards it, dealing damage to any that resisted. Those that managed to overcome its strength suffered the damage of that, along with an unhealthy dose of electricity from the Lightning Tether. Anyone who did escape took increasingly more severe electrical burns, the further they got from the tether rods planted on the shell.

Staying on the shell was not a valid option either, as that left them as sitting ducks for the dark tentacles looking to drag them into the pit. The monsters tried destroying the rods anchoring the tethers, which exploded with startling force. That was enough to inflict massive harm, and Belinda immediately created fresh tethers.

As for Belinda's familiars, her lantern had returned to her eyes, allowing Belinda to fire eyebeams at stray monsters between copying Clive's Wrath of the Magister spell, restoring her detonated tether rods or refreshing the Pit of the Reaper. Any gap periods she filled by simultaneously blasting bolts of force from her wand and beams from her staff and eyes.

Her echo spirit was also mimicking Clive's Wrath of the Magister. Unlike Belinda's copy, however, the familiar's version was more illusion than reality. It did inflict a respectable amount of force damage, but nothing compared to the real thing with its massive damage and debilitating effects. It looked real enough, though, even to magical senses. That force monsters and messengers alike to scatter out of its way.

Stash also moved into action, doing his best impression of Sophie. This meant imitating her speed by turning into a flitter drake which looked like something between a lizard and a hummingbird. It somehow took the worst aesthetic elements of both, turning into a grotesquery that somehow managed to look too small and too large at the same time. It had not endeared Stash to Sophie when he first used the form, explaining that it was the way he could be most like her.

The ugly form was hard to make out, however, as Stash did indeed move through the battlefield in a blur. He specifically went after the monsters that managed to avoid Belinda's defensive measures as they continued to harass Onslow's shell with attacks.

The messenger, Marek Nior Vargas, absently blocked a projectile fired by a gold rank adventurer with his wing. His attention on the adventurer that had dived deep into the monster horde for the second time. He had grabbed Marek's interest the first time because the move had made no apparent sense. The man had escaped, a worthy enough feat, although the attempt had unsurprisingly left him beaten and bloodied, for what seemed like no result. Marek's confusion had lasted until the lines of lightning had started raining down into the horde, originating from points along the path the man had taken.

Marek did not fear a fool who overestimated himself and learned a brutal lesson. But a man with the conviction to take that kind of beating because who knew it was worth the risk was another prospect entirely. The conviction to get things done, and the wisdom to make sure the things getting done were the right, was something that Marek feared.

He had no interest in the attack on the city and whatever schemes the Voice of the Will was using it to enact. The people defending the city, by contrast, could not have cared more; to retreat was to abandon their homes and their families. Marek had seen time and again the flame that lit inside people, and how that flame became a forge producing

heroes and martyrs. The difference in conviction could easily be the deciding factor in the battle.

Marek was confident in his superiority over the servant races here, but he knew that passion and commitment could close that gap in the face of Marek's disinterest. If the defenders of Yaresh started throwing themselves at the enemy with truly reckless abandon, the tenor of the battle would change. Those willing to accept casualties for victory had a grim but powerful advantage, even if any victory they earned became a pyrrhic one.

Seeing the man plunge back into the descending torrent of monsters once again had Marek concerned. Strategic decisions were all well and good, but if the enemy was willing to go to lengths that he was not, then his part of the raid could be brought undone. Marek might not care about the success of his part in the mission, but neither would he ignore a threat. Marek focused his attention more directly onto the man and immediately realised that a threat was exactly who and what he was.

The sheer number and power of magical effects on the man had surpassed silver-rank power levels, to the point of bordering on outright volatile. It was rare for that kind of power escalation, but Marek had seen it a number of times. The result ended up going one of two ways.

If the magic got out of control, the results would annihilate a goodly part of the horde of summons, given the man's location within it. Of course, the man himself would die with them, but that might even be his purpose. But if he held on, any silver-ranker wielding that kind of power would be something to behold.

Marek looked on in wonder as he tore through the summons like a wildfire through dry grass. That his fellow messengers could see that display and remain convinced of their inherent superiority amazed him. Standing above all others took work. No one just stumbled arse-backward into the kind of power that let them stand at the peak of the cosmos.

Elsewhere in the battlefield, Jason sneezed.

Chapter 682

Something to Turn the Tide

Jason sneezed.

Jason was standing on the corpse of a monster as it fell through the sky, using shadow arms to hold himself in place. Shade and Gordon were flying next to him as he rode the monster downward, away from a spear-wielding messenger flying above.

“Mr Asano, did you just sneeze?” Shade asked.

“I did. That’s weird, right?”

“Given that you do not have sinuses, I would say yes.”

“Maybe someone is talking about me.”

“I don’t see the relevance.”

“Sometimes you sneeze when someone is talking about you.”

“That does not sound likely.”

“It’s a thing.”

“I do not believe that it is a thing.”

“It’s totally a thi—”

Jason shadow-jumped using his cloak, leaving it behind as a spear made of fused-together teeth passed through it, having been thrown by the messenger. She was rocketing down headfirst, wings back and tight to avoid drag, another spear appearing in her hand as she conjured a fresh one.

A Shade body emerged from a small shadow cast on her body by her arm. Jason jumped out of Shade’s body, conjuring a new cloak around him. Shadow arms shot out of it to grab the messenger and drag Jason down to slam his feet into her back. He pushed his feet in hard as he grabbed her wings and hauled back on them, yanking her body into an arch.

The messenger went from a controlled dive to an uncontrolled plunge. It was a peculiarity of messengers, Jason had discovered, that damaging or constricting a messenger’s wings impeded their ability to fly. This had surprised him as he had always assumed that their wings were unrelated to actual flight. He didn’t know much about aerodynamics, but he knew an eight foot woman with bird wings was not going to fly around without a good lot of magic. Their flight magic was apparently seated in their wings, however, and he was appreciative of the weakness.

With the messenger’s ability to fly curtailed, they were heading for the ground at a rapid pace. Jason continued to pull on her wings while pushing his feet into her back,

holding her in place. She reached back and grabbed his ankles, but lacked the leverage to dislodge him. Bone spikes shot out of her fingertips and dug into his legs, which he ignored.

Numerous shadow arms coming from Jason help him maintain his position, mounted on her back like a sky surfer. One arm held his conjured dagger, making rapid, shallow stabs like a sewing machine. As the dagger loaded her up with special attacks, Jason chanted a spell.

“Bear the mark of your transgressions.”

A small amount of transcendent damage seared a brand onto her face, making her yell all the louder. Jason cast another spell.

“Your fate is to suffer.”

“GET OFF ME YOU FILTH!”

“If you’d warned me you were attacking the city,” Jason shouted over the rush of air as they fell, “I would have had time for a bath. That’s on you.”

She had dropped the conjured tooth spear to grab at his legs, the lengthy weapon having no good angle. When stabbing his legs accomplished nothing, she let them go and conjured a new weapon. This one was a giant blade made from jagged, yellowing bone. It was a vastly oversized sickle with a deeply curved hook; the tip was covered in sharp, irregular barbs. The messenger was holding it so the point was aiming back at herself. It was sized just right to swing at her back and the man perched upon it.

“Lady, has anyone ever told you that your powers seem kind of evil?”

“DIE!”

She swung the sickle back over her head to stab at Jason with pinpoint accuracy. The viciously barbed tip looked like it passed through Jason, as if he were a ghost. In reality, a combination of a subtle back-sway and his cloak bending space meant it passed through the air in front of him, jabbing into the messenger’s own back. She screamed, more rage than pain, and the weapon vanished.

“You realise that was a terrible plan, right?”

Jason felt a mass of power building inside the messenger but he wasn’t quick enough to escape before bone spikes erupted from every part of her body. They tore through her flesh and thin, practical clothing to jab in every direction. Jason was impaled dozens of times by thin bone spikes that broke off inside him as he moved, the fragments crawling through his body like worms.

“I already have worms for that, you hag,” Jason said through gritted teeth. The messenger didn’t respond, having gone limp. Her aura had also greatly diminished and

Jason realised that the attack took large amounts of her reserves. After madly chasing Jason around the entire battle, her body wasn't up to the expenditure when it was being ravaged by Jason's afflictions already. He suspected the main culprit was his Tainted Meridians affliction, which forcibly raised mana costs. It made the massive attack consume even more mana than the messenger had realised and she passed out from mana exhaustion.

Jason forcibly pushed himself off the spikes, more of them breaking off in the process. He used his cloak to float, letting the unconscious messenger drop. He knew she would likely wake before hitting the ground, even if there was only a short drop left. Messengers recovered even faster than adventurers, so she would—

Jason watched her crash into the ground, limbs in that awkward sprawl of a thing that wasn't alive anymore.

“Huh.”

Valk Vohl was far from a stand-up citizen of Yaresh, but there was a difference between being a criminal and not standing up when angels and their strange pet monsters invaded. Not when he could fight. He was no adventurer, but he'd done his part during the monster surge and he was doing it again now. He was back to back with some adventurer whose name he'd forgotten, controlling what looked like a giant stick figure made of swords as it swung its arms at the monsters.

It wasn't enough. The monsters kept pouring out of the sky, no matter how many they killed, and they were close to the point of being overwhelmed. He and the adventurer were both low on mana, their armour rent and skin wet with blood.

When one of the messengers splattered onto the broken flagstones of the road, bone spikes sticking out and limbs awkwardly splayed, he was only startled for a moment. It, possibly she, wasn't getting up to kill him, so he turned his attention back to the things that were. Then he saw a figure emerge from the shadow of a half-collapsed bordello.

There was something about the man that unnerved him, and he realised that he couldn't sense that man's presence, even looking right at him.

“Gold-ranker,” he said, the words arresting the attention of the other adventurer.

“Where?” he asked, looking around. He saw the man who had come from the shadows, walking over to the dead messenger. He was calm in the chaos, wearing a robe the colour of dried blood. His eyes were inhuman, glowing blue and orange. His features were just a little too sharp for a truly classic high-rank handsomeness, the neat beard failing to entirely hide the lengthy chin.

“We could use a little help here!” the adventurer called out and the man looked up at them. Then his gaze moved upward, to the monsters above. That was when they felt his aura. It rolled out like a physical thing, making the air around them seem heavy. They realised he was no gold-ranker, but he didn’t feel like an essence user, either. His aura was tyrannical, as if everything belonged to him by virtue of it being around him. Valk feared for a moment that he was some kind of wingless messenger, until he saw how the monsters reacted.

They ran.

The creatures flew off, crashing into their fellows still coming down in a mad panic to flee whatever the man standing over the dead messenger was. Valk watched them go, then felt his gaze drawn to the man as if by a magnet. He watched as the man held a hand over the messenger and chanted a spell, his voice winter cold.

“As your life was mine to reap, so your death is mine to harvest.”

Transcendent light of blue, silver and gold was drained from the corpse, into the mans hand as the body dissolved into rainbow smoke. As the man drained the messenger’s energy, Valk thought he heard a scream, but it was somehow picked up with his aura senses, not his ears. An image formed over the man, that of a shadowy bird speckled with silver stars. The man finished claiming the messenger’s energy and the image vanished.

“Who are you?” Valk asked him.

“I only drove the monsters off for a moment,” the man said, his voice hard but lacking the malevolence with which he had chanted the spell. “Get what rest you can and be ready for their return.”

“Will you stay and help?”

“More messengers are coming for me. I won’t bring them down on you.”

Shadows rose up to wreath his body, becoming a shadowy mantle. A dark figure rose from Valk’s own shadow and the man stepped into it, vanishing. The shadow figure than retreated into Valk’s shadow, also disappearing. He stared at his shadow warily, wondering what else was in there.

Jason emerged from Shade’s body on a rooftop, looking up. He could sense Rufus not far off, and an army of monsters glowing with Rufus’ silver and gold flames. Soon enough, Rufus would use his zone power, eclipse, and start consuming those afflictions, hopefully shooting a few messengers out of the sky.

Jason wished that he had been as effective. He had taken out of the messengers harassing him, but they had won and he had lost. It was almost certainly too late for his butterflies to spread properly, even if he managed to get them going now. He'd been pointlessly running around the whole battle, accomplishing nothing.

Jason had not felt inadequate in his power set in years, since he had been a green iron-ranker with half his power set yet to awaken. But he could sense the places around the city, and even this battle over the entertainment district, where affliction specialists were succeeding where he failed. It was the first time that he felt lesser for being an affliction skirmisher.

For all that they were forced to build whole teams to hide behind, it was here, in open war, that they showed their true worth. Left alone they would die quickly, where Jason would thrive. But where he had stealth powers, they had afflictions. Where he had utility powers, they had affliction. And where he had affliction, they had afflictions.

Jason had to find ways to make his powers work in any situation, where they simply picked the appropriate ones from their selection. They weren't restricted to complicated butterfly-based delivery systems that could be shut down by an enemy that knew what they were doing. If an enemy stopped one approach, they could simply use another.

Jason had already given up on wiping out huge waves of monsters with his butterflies some time ago. It wasn't going to work and there were other afflictions for that. Instead, he decided to focus on wiping out the messenger team that had been sent after him. The monsters were ultimately a disposable force, and if enough messengers went down, the enemy would pull out.

His efforts to put a stop to the messenger team had not gone as well as he had hoped at first. They were quite capable, working together well and harassing him without any exploitable overextensions. They even had one of the messenger's rare healers, meaning that chipping away at them was pointless.

The group of messengers were a team and their practised cooperation showed as they swiftly eliminated any butterflies, along with any monsters that were spawning them. In response, Jason had spread out his attempts to trigger a butterfly chain.

The biggest advantage Jason had over them was that they absolutely had to shut down the butterflies and anything producing more of them – ideally including Jason. They destroyed the butterflies and any monster producing them. This meant that he could leverage his mobility to force them to split up.

Eventually, he had allowed their most aggressive member to get what seemed like a clear shot at Jason's back. She overextended, a little too far from where the others were

quashing butterflies, allowing Jason to counterattack. Now she was dead and devoured, her remnant life force getting him a little closer to another chance to resurrect.

He looked up at the teeming monsters, sensing the messengers amongst them. They would stick together now that he'd taken one of them out; they had to know as well as he did that it was too late for the butterflies to have a massive impact. They would most likely stay as a group, eliminating butterflies as best they could, but letting some of them go rather than compromise their safety again.

Shade stood next to Jason as he watched the sky.

"Thinking on it, Mr Asano, I may have been wrong."

"About what?"

"The sneeze. We know that your powers often interpret themselves in a way that has meaning to you, and we know that you have some powerful sensory ability that you are unable to consciously use. Perhaps your sneeze is a manifestation of that mysterious sensory power, revealing that someone actually was talking about you."

"I have an extra sense I don't know about?"

"The capabilities demonstrated by your original power called the Quest System prove that. It was your ability, yet it knew things that your conscious mind did not."

"You're right," Jason mused. "Do you think I'll be able to use the sense that made that power work once I'm higher rank?"

"Perhaps. Or perhaps that sensory power is long gone and it really was just a sneeze. That power may have been fuelled by lingering astral energy from when you first became an outworlder. The ability may have evolved for the simple reason that the fuel ran out and you couldn't use it anymore."

"You'd only just become my familiar had barely signed on when I lost that ability right?"

"That is correct, Mr Asano."

"How did you even think of that ability, to draw that conclusion? You barely saw it in action."

"It is not a conclusion, Mr Asano, but a postulation. As to why I thought of the ability, it is arguably the most startling one in your repertoire. A sensory ability that powerful, even when you were normal rank? Clearly it was not tied to your aura or magical senses as you had neither. I am very old, Mr Asano, and there is very little that I am unable to at least postulate on. Whatever sense fuelled your Quest System ability is outside even my experience."

"So you have no idea?"

“At best, I could guess at something that I cannot be certain is even real. If anyone, it would pertain to you, but I hesitate to speak on it. It is more myth than anything, and less the ‘heroes and gods’ kind of myth than the ‘man in a trailer with a foil hat’ kind of myth. Although it usually does involve heroes and gods.”

“You’ll have to tell me about it some time we aren’t in the middle of a city invasion.”

“I had been wondering why you were just standing here. Are you attempting to confront the remainder of the messenger team?”

“No, they’d kill me. But I want them close enough to really see what they’ve chosen to pit themselves against.”

“I thought you were saving that for when they—”

“They will. Soon. I might have been shut down, but plenty of others weren’t. My biggest contribution was tying up a bunch of messengers so they couldn’t harass other adventurers. The adventurers here on the ground are feeling overwhelmed, but they’re holding on. People like Zara and the affliction specialists are doing work, and the messengers’ commander will need something to turn the tide.”

Chapter 683

The Strongest Arrow in His Quiver

Marek offered a mental salute to the man rampaging through the monster horde. He had managed to overhear one of the man's companions call him Humphrey, and Marek hoped he would survive to eventually reach gold-rank. He would like to face him in battle, perhaps finding a clue in that confrontation to push his own advancement forward. He lamented that while this battlefield had many exceptional silver-ranked enemies, the golds were only passable. It seemed that the defenders of the city had limited care for the civilians of the entertainment district.

With the gold-rankers being adequate but unexceptional, Marek wished he'd been chosen for other battlefields. He could sense more impressive essence users in other parts of the city, including one whose aura was a match for most messengers.

He turned his attention to the silver-ranker he suspected of being Asano. Two people with such unusual auras implied they were connected, perhaps with the gold-ranker instructing the silver. If he personally intervened, would the gold-ranker move to assist, giving him the chance for a more exciting battle?

Marek shook his head, scolding himself. Compromising the strategic situation for personal ends was the kind of behaviour he despised in a certain breed of messenger that he looked down on. That most of his fellow messengers fell into that group was a misfortune he lamented regularly.

Marek frowned as he sensed the team he sent to harass Asano lose one of their number. He was impressed, having sent neither rash nor weak people to contain the man. Even so, the harbinger butterflies were still not establishing themselves, so the situation required no further intervention. Marek did not want to lose people, but some casualties were inevitable.

The man Humphrey also did not require Marek's intervention. For all he was impressively carving a path through the monster horde, time would put an end to the rampage more effectively than a costly confrontation. The unstable power driving him would soon come to an end, one way or another. Humphrey was certainly destructive, yet still failed to impact the battle as much as the wide area attack specialists amongst the adventurers. Marek's messengers were of more use containing them than going after Humphrey. He could easily kill messengers in his current state, and Marek could afford to lose however many summoned monsters he took down.

The monsters were not infinite, however, for all the expense they had employed to make it seem so to the defenders. The Voice of the Will, Jes Fin Kaal, had brought in the artefacts that were enhancing the number of monsters the summoners could call up at once. The acquisition was made against the advice of Marek and other gold-rankers, but she had overruled them. Even so, she never explained what made them worth the resources and favours expended to obtain them, significant even to the messengers.

At least the expensive artefacts were located outside the barrier. If the adventurers were able to reach them and shut off the monster spigot, the raid would come to a swift end, the costs coming to nothing. He wondered if Jes Fin Kaal would see it that way, since the success of the city raid was clearly not her true objective. Whatever political game she was playing, it unfortunately had the approval of the astral king, or his disinterest at the very least. Otherwise, he would have stopped her already.

Again, Marek told himself not to dwell on it. All he had to do was an adequate job and get as many of their people out alive as was viable. If he started digging into whatever plots the voice was carrying out through the city invasion, it would only cost him, and get him nothing. He was sure that she was scheming against someone amongst the messengers, but equally confident it was not him. He was carefully apolitical as a defence mechanism.

This was part of why he had been so reserved in directing his portion of the raid, even as those under his command chafed at his conservative strategy. The gold-rankers were alright, being seasoned warriors, but Marek could feel the hunger in his silver-rankers under his command. They were straining like an untrained beast on a leash, eager to cover themselves in glory and adventurer blood.

They were going to be disappointed. Marek was never going to let the most reckless element of his forces do as they wished and, if the adventurers managed to force a direct conflict with the messengers, he would signal the withdrawal. He wasn't sacrificing anyone he didn't have to on the altar of Jes Fin Kaal's schemes, even if she was voice of the astral king's will.

He could sense that in other battlefields, some commanders had made different decisions, chasing the same glory as their silver-rank subordinates. That was far from enough to convince him to let his messengers loose. It accomplished just the opposite, the casualties he sensed under more proactive commanders being exactly what he wanted to avoid.

It was, however, time to make a change. The adventurers were starting to press in, their affliction specialists starting to take hold in spite of the messengers working to

suppress them. Unlike the man working alone behind enemy lines, these were people with a frustrating variety of afflictions and delivery systems, as well as entire teams dedicated to making sure they were used.

It was time to draw the strongest arrow in his quiver. It was one that most other commanders had already fired, to what Marek considered insufficient effect. While Marek was forced to concede that aura superiority had its advantages in the establishing moments of a conflict, he saw using it immediately as a waste. Essence users had demonstrated time and again that when given time to adjust, they could fight at near-full capability under aura suppression.

Compared to that, a sudden and well-timed aura wave could finish an enemy already under pressure, or reverse a disadvantageous trend. That was what Marek faced in his own battlefield, so it was time to turn the tide.

A large wave of destructive magic headed for Marek, his gold-rank opponent having cast a large spell while Marek had been contemplating his options. He glanced up at a house-sized sphere of blue-gold flames barrelling down on him, burning through monsters as it went. Marek fed mana into his wings and flapped them a single time in the direction of the fireball. It was blasted back the way it had come, causing the gold-rank adventurers to scramble out of the way.

Marek sighed with boredom, wishing that the only capable adventurers in his battle hadn't been silver-rank. He took out his communication stone and issued a directive to every messenger under his command.

“Unleash your auras.”

In the early stages of the battle over the entertainment district, the area-specialist teams had started off strong. They had been carving large chunks out of the monsters, which earned them the focused attention of messengers, suppressing their effectiveness. Then, slowly but surely, they started pushing back the messengers, once again thinning out the monsters seeking to descend and dig through to the civilian bunker.

The adventurers were becoming so effective that more monsters arrived at the ground dead than alive. As one of the adventurers working at ground level, Rufus had to watch out for monsters falling like rain. Despite operating at ground level, though, Rufus was spending little time on the ground. He moved through the air with a combination of silver-rank acrobatics and short-range teleport powers. Many adventurers failed to fully leverage their new physical limits after ranking up, but Rufus was too well-trained for that.

He used the monsters themselves as platforms, hopping between them like a frog moving between lily pads.

Rufus didn't use the buildings often despite the frequent convenience of a rooftop. The entertainment district looked like a bombing site, with no building having escaped damage. He didn't trust any of them to not collapse under him.

The monsters often didn't react as Rufus landed on them, lacerated them with his gold and silver swords before moving on, leaving gold and silver flames in his wake. The summoned creatures were under a compulsion to dig down to the bunker, mostly hovering in the air and firing ranged attacks at the ground. Many didn't even fight back against the adventurers, simply drilling down as far as they could before being taken out.

Rufus' afflictions were useful for setting up the big attacks that would hopefully shoot down messengers, but ineffective at clearing out monsters. The disadvantage of Rufus' eclectic power set was that any individual element was somewhat weak, requiring skill to draw out the potent synergies.

The main work of handling the monsters was being done by an affliction specialist. Rufus didn't know the woman but she was clearly effective, which both sides had come to recognise. A full dozen messengers had been deployed to suppress her, but three full adventuring teams had moved to counter.

The messengers had been well-chosen, all being protective types that appeared to have healthy amounts of defence, affliction resistance and even self-healing and cleansing. That was something an affliction specialist could overcome, given time and protection, but the more focus she had on the messengers, the less time she spent clearing out monsters.

As a result, the adventurers on the ground were increasingly feeling the pressure. Monsters were digging down, through layers of street, rock and buried magical protections, slowly uncovered and broken. Rufus picked a building that looked reasonably intact to land on and paused long enough to look over the situation. He opened a voice channel.

"Jason, are you busy?"

"No, actually. Things are swinging our way, so you can expect the messengers to drop the aura hammer soon. I'm getting ready for when that happens."

"Ready how?"

"The usual."

"Something stupid, self-destructive and absurdly attention grabbing?"

"Pretty much."

"Do you have a few moments before that happens?"

“I can spare a little time. I should probably scoot off before the messengers hunting me get here, anyway. What do you need?”

“I’ve got an affliction specialist dealing with her own set of messengers. She’ll get through them but they’re pretty shielded up, so it’s taking longer than we need it to. Any chance you could come in and brighten the messenger’s day?”

Jason stepped from the shadow of a broken section of wall.

“I can do that,” he said.

“It’s over—”

“I can sense it,” Jason said before Rufus had a chance to point. Rufus could barely sense anything amongst the mess of auras that was a magical battlefield, but Jason turned his gaze the right way immediately. He moved back to the shadow he had appeared from and vanished into it.

Elseth Culie was frustrated. The teams defending her were doing an excellent job, but she wasn’t doing her part as fast as she needed. Some of the messengers had flexible but comprehensive full body armour that had to be dug through before she could afflict them directly. Others had classic bubble shields, while the more annoying ones had both. Some pushed off the afflictions on to proxies, such as the one who created clones of herself and the one who collected afflictions into her feathers, shooting them back at Elseth’s defenders.

She had answers to all of these, from resonating or disruptive force afflictions to spells that replaced afflictions on a target them moment they were disposed of. But with the messengers also purging, dispelling and cleaning, as well as replacing dissolved shields and disintegrated armour, it was taking too long. With each passing moment she more desperately needed to refocus on monster slaying.

Suddenly, someone was next to her, startling her with its lack of aura. At first she thought it was a monster, draped in what were clearly magic shadows. It glanced at her with alien eyes from within a dark hood.

“I’m going to eat your afflictions,” he told her in a man’s voice. His tone was cold with a hint of apology, but the clear intention to do as he said, whatever she might have wanted. His shadow rose up like a living thing and he stepped into it, disappearing. Then he was amongst the messengers, loudly chanting a spell.

“Feed me your sins.”

The transcendent light of messenger life force shone from within the messengers, tainted by Elseth’s afflictions. She was familiar with the spell he was using; a rare one that

usually awakened by those with intentions that were bright but powers that were dark. She was unsurprised, then, as her afflictions were devoured and transcendent damage was left in their place.

Transcendent damage ignored any protections and dug right into the messengers, who immediately retreated. Elseth was certain they were going in search of the healing and cleansing they would need to survive. With all the afflictions she had dumped on them turned transcendent, it would take a lot.

As the messengers fled upwards, the shadowy man floated down. Her defenders let him through as they looked to her for new direction.

“We need to get back to clearing monsters,” she declared. It was an obvious statement, but the first part of command was being certain and confident. Knowing what she was doing was also useful, but lower priority.

The man landed gently next to her and pushed the hood from his head. He had sharper features than humans preferred, but his human face had an exotic appeal to elven sensibilities.

“Prepare your people for an aura assault,” the man warned her. “You reclaiming control over the ground level will probably be the final straw that provokes...”

He trailed off as an aura dropped down like a hammer. The messengers in the battlefield had all unleashed their auras at once, silver and gold-rankers harmonised in a symphony of power. The auras of the messengers were fundamentally different to those of essence users, as if they were not just spiritual but physical. There was a weight to their suppressive force, and Elseth felt her aura suppressed as if the titanic hand of a god was reaching down to cover her.

That was when she finally sensed the aura of the man in front of her. It swept out like a colonial power, claiming territory as it pushed out what was there before. He created a bubble that felt more like the messengers than his fellow essence users, and while Elseth’s aura was freed up, she still did not feel comfortable. There was an overwhelming sense of domination, her spiritual senses telling her that she was safe only by the benevolence of the power controlling the area around her. A power that demanded obedience.

Elspeth and the other adventurers looked at the man with unease as he tilted his head to look up. A strange monster looking like an empty cloak surrounded by floating orbs appeared. She felt some of the others tense but they quickly felt the link between the man and his familiar.

“Gordon,” the man said. “Let’s get to work.”

Chapter 684

I Have to Go Fight Evil

The commander of the adventurer forces defending the entertainment district was Eilaf Hayel, a gold-rank elven adventurer and Yaresh native. He was a veteran of fighting the messengers, having assaulted their strongholds more than a dozen times. He was extremely familiar with the aura suppression tactic they employed and how it impacted the morale of adventurers. The fact that they hadn't used it from the opening moments of the battle was not a relief but a concern.

Eilaf's gold-rank senses allowed him to monitor the auras around the city. In most of the battlegrounds, the messengers had deployed their auras immediately. This had helped them gain a foothold as they came through the breach, but Eilaf had watched in his own battlefield that the ceaseless torrent of monsters didn't need the help.

That the commander he was up against held their auras in reserve suggested that he was not underestimating the adventurers, which was unfortunate. One of the weaknesses common to messengers in Eilaf's encounters with them was an overwhelming arrogance that led them to underestimate opponents. He had hoped a messenger that didn't undervalue their opposition was weak enough that they had to act with caution.

That hope was forlorn. The messenger commander was not just powerful but the single strongest messenger Eilaf had ever seen. Most messengers were marginally weaker than a well-trained adventurer, and while there were certainly exceptions, he had never seen anything like this.

The commander was shrugging off the most powerful attacks that Eilaf and his fellow gold-rankers could throw at him, and sometimes throwing them right back. Fortunately, the messenger was more interested in commanding his forces than pressing the adventurers by attacking in person. He was likewise directing his forces conservatively, a situation Eilaf wanted to continue for as long as possible.

The Battle of Yaresh, not just in the entertainment district but across the city, was essentially a race. The messengers were trying to dig out and slaughter as many civilians as they could before the city barrier restored itself, trapping them inside. Eilaf didn't know why his counterpart did not push for speed, but as it was the only mistake the man seemed to be making, Eilaf wanted to capitalise on it.

Eilaf had his own gold-rankers pressure the other gold-rank messengers, prioritising them over the commander. Aware that the conservative strategy could be a trap to lure them in, Eilaf didn't let his people push too hard and overextend themselves. Both sides

being conservative was to the adventurers' advantage, so he would let that play out as long as he could.

The move proved a sound one. Eilaf came to suspect that the enemy commander was less than enthralled with his assignment and was more interested in running out the clock than pushing for success. If the man would rather keep his people alive and leave unsuccessful than sacrifice them for victory, Eilaf was the last person who would get in his way. He just made sure that the commander was occupied keeping his gold-rankers alive rather than interfering with the silver-rankers.

Things continued to go well, as there were some real gems amongst the silver-rank adventurers. The more the battle turned in favour of the adventurers, however, the more Eilaf anticipated the aura drop. The adventurers had all been warned about messenger auras and many were already veterans who had experienced them already. Even so, Eilaf wished he could go around and warn them all again. That was not practical in a battle, but he could at least prepare his gold-rankers.

Eilaf was unsurprised when their foes finally unleashed auras that hit the adventurers like a physical force. It was, to a small degree, albeit not enough to cause any harm. The real impact was spiritual, with just enough kinetic force to show the essence users that messenger auras were fundamentally different.

It was a subtle but effective intimidation tactic, which was ultimately the purpose of the aura wave. Suppressing the auras of adventurers did have a tactical impact as aura essence abilities were shut off, but it wasn't the main goal. Having their auras pushed down left the adventurers feeling weak and helpless, like bullied children.

That reaction wasn't universal amongst adventurers, with many fighting on, unconcerned. Those were mostly veterans who had besieged messenger strongholds and tasted their auras in the past. For most, however, a suppressed aura left them feeling vulnerable and exposed. Such tactics were key means by which the messengers propagated their sense of superiority.

The adventurers didn't collapse under the assault, but it certainly arrested their forward momentum. Eilaf and his gold-rankers had the edge in both numbers and, discounting the enemy commander, individual strength. The combat power became less relevant as the gold-rankers on both sides moved to pure spiritual conflict, floating in place as it looked like they were trying to stare each other down. If not for the advantage in numbers, the adventurers would have been overwhelmed by the messengers' advantage in spiritual strength.

The silver-rankers were likewise clashing aura-to-aura, and the adventurers were struggling. They did not give up the physical conflict the way the gold-rankers had, but their spiritual battle was reflected in physical combat. The previous advance of the adventurers had come to a halt, while the messengers went from holding back to pushing back, taking the fight to their enemy.

Elite adventurers were well-trained in aura use, but the messengers simply had a higher baseline. Not only were their auras stronger but even the least messenger had a refined grasp of how to use it that few could match. Adventurers were used to heavily outclassing any individual foe, and often found themselves taken aback at how close messengers came to matching them. As a result, first encounters with messengers were the ones most likely to go poorly.

Eilaf had seen green adventurers struggle against messengers time and again. He felt unease in the auras of adventurers, and doubt could be a plague in a fighting force, and panic was a wildfire. Morale was the key to any battle, and the side that lost it was the side that broke, regardless of relative strength. The monster torrent was gaining ground against adventurers suddenly struck with hesitation. Unfortunately, all Eilaf could do was hope that his adventurers had the steel to hold on.

Elseth Culie was finally getting back to clearing out monsters after the messengers fled to seek healing. Her task became more urgent as the adventurers on the ground became less effective under the aura suppression blanketing the battlefield. Elseth and the teams protecting her were in a bubble that held the suppression off, centred on a man currently looking up.

Aano's aura was not unlike that of the messengers, if not even more domineering, but she quickly stopped worrying about that and focused on killing more monsters. Asano himself was not moving, watching as his alien familiar drew lines and symbols in the sky that glowed in blue and yellow. The creature Asano called Gordon was orbited by six blue and orange nebula orbs in the pattern of eyes. Each orb fired beams of blue or orange energy, leaving glowing shapes in the sky like fireworks that didn't stop lingering.

All six eyes drew intricately intersecting lines, the beams implausibly managing to never cross one another. The familiar was drawing a massive ritual circle, not just on a flat plane but in a sphere. Lines, runes and sigils were woven together in a floating sculpture of light.

The summoned monsters did not interfere with it or anyone inside Asano's aura, visibly fleeing from it. This left the other adventurers protected by the aura free to pour out

attacks. Elseth made up for lost time as best she could, giving no thought to her dwindling mana reserves as her spells pumped out mass afflictions that were already spreading through the monsters.

She only paused to pull out her most expensive mana potion and chug it down, taking the chance to look over what Gordon was doing. It had completed its sphere and started crafting smaller ones around it, connected by lines. The smaller spheres drifted around the central sphere on their own.

“An orrery?” she said, not realising it was out loud. The finished magical sculpture had formed an intricate and startlingly beautiful orrery, the smaller spheres moving around the larger central one. It was a massive creation, the size of a wealthy townhouse, and as she looked at it she realised that the sculpture was a ritual magic diagram, but unlike any she had seen before.

Like many adventurers, Elseth had a decent grounding in ritual magic. Even so, she failed to grasp even the most basic principles of what the familiar has crafted. She suspected that it operated on some magical paradigm completely outside of her experience.

“Gordon turned out to be something of a magic artist,” someone said and she looked over, not recognising the voice. It was Asano, proudly watching his familiar. She hadn’t realised it was him because his icy voiced had thawed, speaking warmly of Gordon. He turned to look at her.

“You should probably get back to the afflictions,” he suggested, his voice still soft. The friendly smile was completely undercut by the aura pouring out of him, oppressive and territorial. She was equally parts glad and astounded that it was holding off the messengers’ collective aura, but she also wanted to leave it as soon as possible.

While Gordon continued to draw the most outrageous and elaborate ritual Jason had ever seen, he concentrated on maintaining his aura against the messengers. They had somehow managed to blend their auras together into a singular force, a technique Jason would ask Amos Pensinata about later. The messenger aura was spread not just across the entire entertainment district but also the battlefield filling the sky above it. This dilution of power meant that Jason was able to push it back over a moderate area, only possible because the gold-rankers from each side were negating each other. He managed sufficient to shield the affliction specialist and the adventurers supporting her, with space for more adventurers who found them to take shelter. She went back to dosing monsters

while the rest lashed out with ranged attacks or left to guide other adventurers to the safety of Jason's aura.

There had been very few occasions in which Jason had truly opened up his aura, projecting it with as much strength as he could muster. It had reached the point of being too powerful, a danger Farrah had warned him of on the day she introduced him to auras. His aura also covered too much ground, pushing through all but the most extreme measures to constrain it. If not for the suppressive force of a full contingent of messengers, it would have spread out across the city, likely harming any normal-rankers that had not yet reached a bunker.

While he regretted that there would likely be collateral once Gordon was done, Jason's resolve did not falter. He could sense the messengers pushing back against the adventurers, allowing more and more monsters to safely descend. They had already started digging through the ground at an accelerated rate, growing closer to a breach of the bunker's defences. If he had even a chance to arrest the aura advantage of the messengers, he would take the chance.

Rufus arrived next to him in a flash of light, startling the adventurers whose defensive perimeter he had circumvented.

"You're doing something about this, right?"

"You expect me to stop the collective aura of who knows how many messengers, all by myself."

"Yes."

"You have some pretty outlandish expectations there, mate."

"Yes. I hate to break it to you, John," Rufus said, using Jason's fake name due to the nearby adventurers. "But you're the one who set up those expectations. Placed in an extreme circumstance, with power levels far above your own..."

He threw his arms out, indicating the wider battle.

"...you do something spectacularly outlandish..."

He pointed to the giant glowing orrery over their heads, then looked flatly at Jason.

"...that you probably shouldn't."

"There you go then," Jason told him. "You just said I shouldn't do it."

"Are you going to do it?"

"Of course I'm going to... sorry, give me a sec. I've got a thing."

Jason looked off into the middle distance, glaring at nothing.

"If you want to fight me, then come in here and get me," he declared to no one, then turned back to Rufus.

“Sorry about that. Anyway, shouldn’t you be taking out some messengers about now?”

“That’s why I’m here,” Rufus told him. “I want to time it for right after you do whatever you’re going to do. I’m hoping to take out a few in single shots.”

“How many afflictions have you left out there to absorb?” Jason asked.

“A lot,” Rufus told him. “So, get to it.”

“I’m waiting on Gordon to finish. He’s doing an amazing job, right?”

“It’s amazing to look at,” Rufus agreed. “What kind of magic is that?”

“I have my suspicions. I’m pretty sure Shade knows and isn’t telling me.”

“That is for the best, Mr Miller,” Shade asserted as he emerged from Jason’s shadow.

“So you say.”

“Since we’re waiting,” Rufus said, “do you have any sandwiches?”

“Who are you talking to?” Jason asked pulling out a sandwich wrapped in paper and handing the slightly larger half to Rufus. They both looked up at the monster-filled sky.

“Have you ever see this many monsters at once?” Rufus asked, then bit into his sandwich.

“Yep,” Jason said. “Not all flyers, like this, though. There was a vorger swarm that came pretty close.”

“In that astral space?”

“The one the Builder tried to take back? No, this was a transformation space. I told you about those, right?”

“When you explained them, they just sounded like astral spaces.”

“Bloke,” Jason scolded. “I’m starting to see why Clive gets cranky when people don’t understand astral magic. A transformation zone is a defence mechanism of reality, when the dimensional membrane has a localised catastrophic failure.”

“But they’re still a dimensional space you can go into, right? Does that just make it a kind of astral space?”

“You can go into a bath and you can go into the ocean, Rufus. Yes, you can slowly soap up your taught, black body and bald head with a sponge in both, but that doesn’t make your bathtub an ocean.”

“I’m not entirely comfortable with that analogy.”

“The point is, they’re different. But if you get both in the same space, you’ve got maybe a month before it blows a hole in the side of reality large enough to suck a planet into the astral. Where it stops existing, because there is no physical reality in the astral.”

“Yes, Jason, I know you saved the world. You mention it quite a lot.”

“You damn right I do. Do know how awesome that is? I do wish I could stop saving it from this dimensional nonsense all the time. I want to fight a guy with a weather machine.”

“Are you in any danger of getting to a point?” Rufus asked.

“About what.”

“You were telling me about when you saw a massive vorger swarm.”

“Oh, right. So, I was in a transformation zone, patching a hole in the side of the universe. I’m just about done when a bunch of vorger came through. There was a nightmare hag, too.”

“Another one? What did it show you that time?”

“It was kind of embarrassing, so I don’t want to say.”

“It’s fine. I’ll ask Farrah.”

“I didn’t tell Farrah.”

Rufus gave him a flat look.

“Please don’t ask Farrah.”

They realised that someone was staring at them and turned to look at the affliction specialist.

“What?” the asked simultaneously.

“Who are you people?”

“This is Rufus and I’m Ja... John. It’s not a fake name.”

Rufus shook his head.

“May I ask your name?”

“Elseth Culie.”

“It’s lovely to meet you,” Rufus told her. “I’ve noticed you’re the main reason the monsters haven’t cracked the bunker yet, so thank you.”

“Who are you?” she asked him.

“He’s a teacher and I’m a cook,” Jason told her.

“You were just talking about saving the world,” she said.

“I’m a very well-paid cook. Also, it wasn’t this world, so you don’t have to worry. Probably.”

Jason looked to his right as Gordon floated down next his, his work completed. They looked up at the final result, a glowing orrery like a solar system made of fireworks that refused to fade. Each sphere was comprised of a complex, nested array of lines, runes and sigils.

“Clive is going to be sorry he missed this,” Jason said as his cloak billowed around him and he rose up into the air.

“You could use a recording crystal,” Rufus suggested, calling up after him.

“No time,” Jason yelled back. “I have to go fight evil.”

“Some of my people have recording crystals,” Elseth offered. “A lot of teams are recording the battle for analysis and posterity.”

“I might take you up on that,” Rufus said. “Thank you.”

“Is your friend going to be able to make sense of that thing? It’s a ritual diagram, right?”

“It is,” Rufus said. “And no, he won’t know how it works. He’ll love it.”

Chapter 685

Stray Thought

Jason floated up, his cloak shaped into gently beating wings as they carried him into Gordon's ritual diagram. His eyes swept over the sophisticated magical orrery, his body tingling as he passed through the glowing lines. He moved to the centre of the large, central sphere. He had the unnerving impression of being inside a complex machine, the operation of which he didn't completely understand. But he did have a basic grasp of how it worked, enough that he could take his place as the final component of the ritual.

Gordon's ritual magic was foundationally different to what Jason had been taught. The same was true of every ritualist on Pallimustus and Earth. Neither Dawn nor Shade had been willing to explain it to him, both transparently feigning ignorance. He, in turn, declined to tell them something that neither seemed to have realised: Gordon's ability to use that ritual magic was somehow bound to Jason.

Gordon had become even more linked to Jason than an ordinary familiar. It was when he did so that Gordon unsealed the ability to use the strange ritual magic. Their link gave Jason some instinctive insight into how it worked, but nowhere near enough to attempt using it himself. It wasn't knowledge but an instinctive feel, similar to what he had for astral forces.

Jason was not entirely without knowledge, however. He had spent a year roaming around Earth, using the Builder's magic door to access the fundamental underpinnings of reality. He had been crudely repairing the link between worlds, working with trial and error, without any theoretical framework. In that time, he had slowly and fumblingly obtained some understanding of the fundamental mechanisms of reality, and in Gordon's magic, he recognised the framework that he had lacked. By his own admission, his comprehension was that of a monkey attempting to do maths, but at least he could make the attempt. Also, he loved bananas.

It would take years of study that Jason wasn't even sure how to do before he would gain any real comprehension of the alien ritual magic. But all he needed today was the means to trigger Gordon's ritual, and for that, he knew enough. Just. He was pretty sure. Worst comes to worst, he could ask Gordon for a hint.

This was only the second time that Gordon had used this kind of ritual magic. The first had been when Jason had flooded himself with reality core energy that needed to be bled off. Gordon had used an aura projection ritual that drained the power out of the very

unconscious Jason to fuel itself, blasting his aura across Rimaros. That ritual had been inefficient by design, so as to drain the excess power killing Jason.

This new ritual was the same basic concept, a significantly more sophisticated refinement of the original. Along with being orders of magnitude more efficient, it did not replicate the same aura projection that ordinary ritual magic could accomplish. It was designed to draw out and project Jason's aura far more comprehensively. More than simple aura amplification, it would dig out every element of Jason's soul and put it on display, impressing exactly who and what he was on everyone within range. And that range would be enormous.

This time, Jason was an active participant. Floating in the air, he nervously opened and closed his fists. He thought back to his early days on Pallimustus, desperately trying to hide the vulnerability he felt. Confidence was something with which he had taken a hard 'fake it until you make it' approach. He had hidden his fear and confusion by making everyone else fearful and confused, veering manically between movie monster impressions and babbling nonsense.

Somewhere along the way, the version of himself that was cranked up to eleven had stopped being a mask. As he prepared to become more vulnerable than he ever had, it was time to find out if he had the resolve; if he'd finally made it or, deep down, he was still just faking it. This would, quite literally, announce himself to the world. No hiding behind bad manners, movie monster impressions or thirty-year-old television references. His soul would be on display for all to see, allies and enemies alike.

When Gordon had suggested this, Jason had recognised the value. Especially after his abject failure to get Gordon's butterflies up and running, this was the only way for Jason to make a substantive impact on the wider battle. Despite his self-assurances that he was happy just being one more adventurer, it never occurred to him *not* to do something outrageous and stupid to help sway the battle on a wider scale.

While Gordon's new ritual magic was unquestionably powerful, Jason could already see reasons it would never replace the ritual magic he already knew. Firstly, the complexity was absurd. Instead of relatively simple diagrams that could be drawn on a flat surface, these rituals were three-dimensional structures. Without a power like Clive's to draw them in the air, anyone using them would need to assemble actual sculptures.

The real killer, though, was in how the rituals were powered. Ordinary rituals drew on ambient magic, meaning that all most rituals needed was to not be in a magical dead zone. Gordon's rituals required a different source. That had been the reality core energy inside Jason for Gordon's first ritual, but he was definitely not trying that again. He didn't

need that level of power anyway, as this new ritual was far more efficient. This time he was going to do something that Dawn had explicitly told him not to: tap into his astral gate.

The astral gate inside his soul was, along with the astral throne, one of the things that fundamentally changed Jason's nature. They were the tools of astral kings, who forged their very souls into physical universes, creating domains where their power was unassailable and all-but-unlimited.

Dawn had told him that he should experiment with the astral throne, which governed physical aspects, while leaving the astral gate alone. It tapped into the deep astral, the infinite plane of raw magic and dimensional forces that Jason was far from ready to handle. After his first time tapping into it had left him convalescing for months, she had advised him to leave it be until he had ranked up. Preferably, all the way to diamond. That it had taken him months after she left before he completely ignored her warning was something of a personal triumph.

She hadn't been wrong, and he knew it. The astral space was the sea on which every universe in the cosmos sailed. What would opening the gate to that infinite power do?

"Explode me like an overfilled water balloon, probably."

"Mr Asano, you're talking to yourself again," Shade said as he emerged from Jason's cloak to float next to him.

"I know," Jason said. "I'm a little distracted trying to use a giant alien magic ritual. Which looks awesome, thank you, Gordon."

"The looks are not the point, Mr Asano," Shade said.

Jason turned his gaze from the glowing ritual sphere to give Shade a flat look. Despite being a blank-faced shadow with just enough softly glowing white to imply a butler's tuxedo, Shade managed to look embarrassed.

"Apologies, Mr Asano; I'm not quite sure what came over me."

"It's a big day," Jason told him. "Just don't let it happen again."

Jason relaxed some of his built-up tension at the banter with Shade, but strain and worry still marked his expression. Around them, the orrery clamoured for power like an insistent pet at meal time. This was his last chance to back out.

"What do you think, Shade? Do I tap into the astral gate and risk getting completely wrecking?"

"You know the price for what you are about to do, Mr Asano. You've paid it before. Channelling more power than you can handle has hurt you in the past, but I'm not telling you anything you don't know. It isn't the first time you've made this choice. You're just wasting time now when we both know that this isn't really a choice for you."

“It kind of is.”

“We don’t have the time for you to lie to me, Mr Asano, let alone yourself. I’ve seen you choose between the safety of others and the safety of yourself time and time again. Stop dithering and get to work.”

“Strict nanny,” Jason said with a chuckle. He sighed, nodded and closed his eyes as he pushed his senses into the orrery. This was not a simple amplification ritual that would passively affect his aura, and he had to feed his aura into it, like loading a cannon. It was a simple enough process, using the same fundamental aura control techniques that Farrah had taught him years earlier.

Jason was connecting with the ritual, which was far more reactive than an ordinary one. He was loading it with his aura, but that was the cannonball and it needed the gunpowder. The orrery was *hungry* and ambient mana was not what it needed. Jason reached into his soul, sending his will through his spiritual realm to where his astral gate rested. He understood its functions only a little more than he did Gordon's ritual magic, but he didn't need to. Today, all he had to do was open it.

Jason's spirit realm had been tapping into the infinite power of the deep astral since before it became a place that others could enter. It started as a trickle of power, replacing his need to feed himself spirit coins or magically rich food. Beyond that gentle, passive stream, drawing on the astral for any more power than that had not been an option. Then came the astral gate. A hole in the wall through which power trickled had now become a tap. And a tap could be opened.

He reached out with his will to open the astral gate the barest sliver. It was the tiniest gap he could manage, and yet a torrent of raw magic geysered into his soul. Like drinking from a fire hose, his senses were overwhelmed as all he could sense was the spray of it striking him like a weapon. Although the impact was spiritual, he almost fell from the sky in his disorientation, which would drop him out of the orrery and collapse the ritual.

He steeled his resolve, concentrating on shaping himself into a conduit, feeding power into Gordon's ravenous orrery. He immediately understood that if he didn't have that outlet, the magic would have ravaged him. Attempting to use the same method to fuel his essence abilities or ordinary rituals would probably kill him, with neither being designed for that kind of power.

Even with the outlet of the orrery, Jason struggled to remain conscious. The power pounded its way through his soul, and as his soul was his body, he felt it as a physical impact. He shook like an old pipe with too much water pressure, his eyes glowing bright like beacons.

The orrery also shone brighter and brighter. The sigils and lines of the central sphere blurred, melding together and hiding Jason's presence, transmuting into a heatless orange sun, stained with ominous swirls of dark blue. The spheres orbiting it also turned solid and took on the familiar nebulous eye shape of Gordon's orbs.

Jason's aura didn't blast out immediately, the orrery building up power like a charging battery. As the source of that charge, Jason floated within the sun, now inundated in blue and orange light. He clenched his fists, holding on as magic continued to explode through him. He maintained a tenuous grasp on lucidity, tapping into meditation techniques to maintain a grip on reality. Even so, his mind was scattered, odd thoughts popping in and out. He absently compared the sensations he was feeling to getting a colonic irrigation from a hurricane and started brainstorming business names for the service.

Jason was barely clinging to sanity by the time the orrery was fully powered. He closed the astral gate more from instinct than conscious command, drooping in the air as he felt like a cored apple. Then the orrery flared to life and Jason snapped back to alertness. He felt his soul pulse like a heartbeat, swelling with each thump.

The aura projection rituals Jason had experienced before were just that: projections. They cast in an image, compared to now where Jason felt like he was genuinely expanding, spreading out over the city. It reminded him of when he had formed his spiritual domains, taking over the transformation zones and remaking them in his image.

This was a declaration. Jason's soul was showing everyone exactly who and what it was. His aura flooded the city, even the areas where gold and diamond rankers held sway. He was not taking over the territory, but simply announcing himself. It was not the formation of a new spirit domain – yet, his mind added, and he scolded himself for the thought. He hoped Knowledge wouldn't tell Dominion about the stray thought.

There was a moment of stillness across the city as the fighting stopped. It was a fleeting instant, less than a second, and then the adventurers, messengers and monsters went back to thrashing one another. But in that instant, something had changed. The summoned monsters became erratic, their summoners struggling to keep them under control. As for the messengers, some became hesitant, but many more enraged, thrown into a berserker frenzy by what they had just sensed. Some attacked their opponents with renewed vigour, while others left their own battles to hunt down the source of the aura.

In any case, Jason had succeeded in his goal. Whether cowed or inflamed, the harmonic interlinking of messenger auras had been disrupted; not just in the entertainment district but across the city. The adventurer commanders didn't waste the opportunity, pushing themselves onto the front foot. The messenger auras weren't gone, but they were

no longer a unified front. As for the messengers themselves, they were not thinking tactically, which the better adventurers made the most of.

Unfortunately for the adventurers, their leaders had held their nerve. The gold-rankers were simply too strong to fall under Jason's influence and were screaming orders and dominating their silver-rank kin, pulling them into line before they gave away too much of an advantage.

In the entertainment district, the orrery faded away, dissolving into the air as Jason floated back to the ground. Jason landed, disoriented as he looked at his hands held out in front of him, the fingers flexing open and closed.

"How are you holding up?" Shade asked him. Jason turned with a confused expression before his eyes focused. He looked back at his hands.

"I'm fine," he said. "I mean, barely standing up, but I'm pretty sure that all I need is a good rest. I think I've finally hammered my own soul so much that it's gotten used to the abuse."

His expression creased into a scowl.

"That doesn't make me sound good."