

Chapter 844

The Only Way It Can Win

The gold-rankers were trapped inside the growing mound of elemental messenger bodies. Whether the messengers were living or dead was irrelevant; so long as there were enough of them, the adventurers and their allies couldn't fight their way out. For all the power wielded by the adventurers, the messengers piled on faster than they could dig their way out.

The chance to escape came from Amos Pensinata and a well-timed use of the weather machine. The result was a Cthulhu death star hovering over the mound of messengers; a humungous orb of water from which numerous tentacles were thrashing about. The tentacles flailed wildly in all directions, but the ones jutting from the bottom of the orb were carving deep gouges in the mound.

Amongst the trapped gold-rankers, the two remaining non-adventurers were Boris and Beaufort, leaders of their respective factions. The head Builder cultist was the one that dug their way out, his body of metal blades carving a hole like a mining drill. They burst through into one of the deeper gouges and immediately fled before the messengers could rebury them.

The adventurers and their allies bolted through the sky, an army of messengers in pursuit. Their goal was an evacuation point where a portal to Jason's soul realm was waiting. If that somehow failed, the acceleration rituals would help them flee as the elemental messengers weren't attuned to them.

Not all of their members were exceptionally swift, some relying on personal transport devices. Those that could move faster held back so as not to split the group when the elemental messengers were nipping at their heels. They made a tactical withdrawal, balancing speed with the need to fight off any messengers who caught up.

One of the most effective delay tactics came from Boris whose wings glowed yellow-orange hot. They trailed a wake of embers behind him that exploded when any messengers got near them. It was far from enough to take any out, but it slowed them down effectively. Boris's swooping path made an obstacle course the messengers had to slow down to avoid. If they failed and got hit, the damage was minimal but they were slowed even more.

Boris looked at Beaufort who was the largest of the gold-rankers. This was because his body was a massive frame of narrow metal and sharp blades, like a man made of scaffolding. The flesh that normally hid his body was segmented and scattered around the

framework like macabre decorations. He flew using bladed wing-scaffolds that weren't close to aerodynamically sound.

"I know we're allies," Boris pointed out, "but you are one of the creepy-looking guys I've ever seen. And I've *seen* some stuff. It's like a bunch of robot praying mantises were in a plane crash."

"Shut up and fly," Beaufort snarled.

"Just so you know," Boris said, "the cyborg voice isn't helping your cause."

"If you have the time to run your mouth," Arabelle told him, "use the energy to flap your wings. They're still chasing us."

"Yeah, but that Pensinata guy is covering us, right?" Boris asked.

"What?"

"Yeah, he hid his aura and slinked off to that water orb while the rest of us did a runner. He's pretty good with aura for an adventurer."

The elemental messengers had split into two groups. Those closest to the fleeing gold-rankers and unencumbered enough to give chase did do. Others were too slow, too distant or part of the mound where living messengers disentangled themselves from the dead.

Those who had not been able to escape the range of the orb tentacles swiftly found themselves under attack. Amos Pensinata hadn't escaped with the others, instead heading straight for the water orb. Moments later, the thrashing tentacles had abruptly changed, going from wild thrashing to focused and efficient attacks. Instead of randomly crashing through the mass of elemental messengers they acted with purpose, breaking the enemy lines and disrupting pursuit of the other gold-rankers.

The messengers unable to give chase to the fleeing gold-rankers instead turned their attention to the orb, plunging fearlessly into its watery depths.

Inside the invisibility sphere floating in the air, Miriam and Jason watched the gold-rankers fighting their way to escape.

"Pensinata didn't join them," Jason said. "He went into the orb."

Miriam turned her attention to the massive hovering sphere, noting the more organised behaviour of the tentacles. She opened a voice chat channel.

"Pensinata, What are you doing?"

"Tying up as many as I can," came the reply. "I'll see to it the others aren't overwhelmed before they get clear."

“They have an open run, now,” she told him. “You’ve done enough. Withdraw while you still can.”

“This is the best way,” Amos said.

“I wasn’t asking, Pensinata,” Miriam said. “Get out now. That is an—”

➤ [\[Amos Pensinata\] has left voice chat.](#)

“Oh, he did not,” Miriam said, baring her teeth.

Jason sent several requests for a voice chat to Amos, all of which were ignored.

“Shade,” he said and the shadow familiar emerged from the void of Jason’s cloak.

“What can I do for you, Mr Asano?”

“Do you have a body on Pensinata?”

“I’m sorry, but I do not. That water is dark, however, and I believe that I can get one there in short order.”

“Do it.”

Another Shade body appeared and immediately left the invisibility shield to shoot through the air. It was more open than how Shade normally operated and he was quickly spotted. Multiple messengers also heading for the orb diverted to go after him. Shade was far too weak to fight them but dashed into and out of the shadows on their bodies, confusing them long enough to escape. After a few such encounters, Shade vanished into the water, dark as the ocean deeps.

“Your shadow is capable,” Miriam observed.

“Yeah, I’m holding him back when we fight together. My limits in power and skill become his. When it’s all him, he knows his business.”

“And what exactly do you have him doing?”

“I need a shadow-jump target.”

Miriam turned to look at him as if he’d grown a second head.

“You intend to teleport into that sphere. The same sphere into which we are watching hundreds of elemental messengers enter.”

“I need to go slap some sense into Lord Pensinata.”

“You need to stay where you are.”

“I know why he’s doing this.”

“I don’t care. I don’t want to lose Pensinata, but the hard truth is that we can. If we lose you while you’re trying to bring him back, it’s all over.”

“And he knows that. It’s why it has to be me.”

“It’s not an acceptable risk.”

“That’s for me to decide, Tactical Commander.”

“If I believe your judgement is compromised—”

“You have the power and training to command this expedition, Miriam, and we both know you’ve been the leader in truth more than I have. Yet I’m the Operations Commander. The one with the last word. You think that would have happened if the Adventure Society didn’t sign off on it? If your Lady Allayeth didn’t?”

“Your relationship with the messengers—”

“Is a reason to put me here, not put me in charge. You get to gold-rank with a little luck and a lot of caution. That means avoiding circumstances like the ones we’re in right now. I go places that don’t exist and do things that aren’t possible. No one does that as much as I have without dying; not even me. That’s why I get the last word, Miriam: I’ve been here before. I know when, where and how far I can push.”

“The risk—”

“I can’t promise I can get Pensinata back. But I promise you I’ll get myself back, even if it means leaving him to die. I do understand what’s at stake here.”

For a long moment, Miriam stared into Jason’s eyes, glowing inside the dark hood.

“Alright,” she said finally. “I’m going to kick myself for not stopping you, but go. Bring him back.”

Jason didn’t reply, instead floating into Shade and vanishing.

At the centre of the watery orb was a pocket of air with ice for a floor. Amos stood in the middle, eyes closed as he took control of the water and the tentacles within it. The messengers were storming the sphere en masse, yet were killed almost as fast as they entered. It was the perfect environment to amplify Amos’ powers, but he was not omnipotent.

The sheer weight of numbers would eventually overcome him and he would die, but it would cost them the most precious resource of all: time. Time for the others to escape. Time for Xandier to put down his wooden doppelganger and face whatever came next. Even the tree’s strongest minions could not match divine power. Unless the tree came up with an answer to that, victory for the adventurers was assured. Amos knew his life was worth setting that up.

Amos sensed the approach of Asano’s familiar through the water. It was startlingly stealthy, but not to Amos’ perception, especially here. He considered destroying it, but cutting off communication was one thing. Attacking an ally’s familiar was another, even if it

was quickly and easily replaced. Shade entered the pocket of air, standing on the icy floor. Amos opened his eyes to look at him.

“Why did Asano send you?” Amos asked. His eyes went wide when Asano himself stepped through his familiar.

Amos had his formidable senses spread across the battlefield, so he noticed the immediate reaction from the enemy at Asano’s emergence from the invisibility field. Their aura locked onto him like sharks smelling blood in the water. The enemy knew what Asano was; they understood his importance.

The messengers pursuing the gold-rankers gave up the chase immediately. They turned around and started dashing back. The rest of the elemental messengers redoubled their rush to penetrate the orb, ignoring their deaths from tentacles and violent, churning water. Even the wooden giant exposed itself to attack in the attempt to get past Xandier and rush the orb with Jason inside it.

“They’re coming for you,” Amos said.

“Yes,” Jason agreed. “Something’s changed. The tree didn’t focus on me earlier in the battle. On anything, really. It’s different now, starting with that attempt to trap the gold rankers. I’m curious as to why, but we don’t have time for why. The fact is that the battle is coming to a head and our enemy is finally acting with a sense of the threat it faces.”

“You need to go.”

“You first.”

“Don’t be—”

“That’s an order, Lord Pensinata.”

Jason had not spoken in the voice Amos knew. This was the cold, hard voice his enemies heard, usually before an excruciating death. Amos had been tutoring Jason for months in aura use and had come to know him well. This was not a side of Asano he had seen pointed in his direction.

“Why did you come here?” Amos asked.

“Because I knew you wouldn’t leave on your own.”

“And I still won’t. We don’t have time for this.”

“No, we don’t.”

“I can’t fight our way out of here,” Amos growled, his signature stoicism breaking.

“Can’t you sense how many of them are converging on us?”

“I can. You did a good job of helping me hone my aura senses.”

“I can’t hold them off. Not forever.”

“Then we’d best leave.”

“I can force a path to get you out, but not if I leave this place. I have more control here.”

“Lord Pensinata, this isn’t what you think it is.”

“What are you talking about?”

When Jason spoke again, his voice was no longer the glacial tone used for enemies. It was soft and sympathetic.

“I’ve seen heroic sacrifice, Amos. Even done it myself a few times. I’d put money down that you’ve convinced yourself that’s what you’re doing, but you’re wrong. I think you know that, deep down.”

“Don’t you—”

“You know how to die like a hero, Amos. It’s something you’ve been ready for most of your life. It’s a lot easier than standing in front of your nephew, ashamed and uncertain. You’d rather die like a coward than live to face the consequences of your decisions.”

Amos may as well have teleported for all Jason saw. One moment the gold-ranker was in the middle of the room. The next, then he was in front of Jason, fist arrested right before impact.

“We don’t have the time for you to hide behind your anger, Lord Pensinata. I’ve done it plenty but we don’t have time for months of therapy.”

A shadow portal opened close to them.

“Bottom line, Lord Pensinata: I’m not leaving until you do, and you know what that means.”

“I can’t go through a silver-rank portal.”

Jason closed his eyes and held a hand out towards the portal, a sheet of void energy inside an obsidian arch. Streaks of gold, silver and blue started flashing in the dark energy.

“Quickly please,” Jason said through gritted teeth. “This is quite strenuous.”

Amos looked at the concentration on Jason’s face and hurried through the portal. The energy holding it open was exhausted by his passage and the portal collapsed. Jason put his hands on his knees and took deep breaths as if he’d just run a marathon. He could feel the elemental messengers approaching faster without Amos and his active defences.

“Shade,” he said and the familiar vanished into Jason’s void cloak. Then Jason himself vanished into it. It floated to the floor, empty, dissolving into nothing as the first messengers broke into the air pocket.

Jason stepped out of the Shade body in the invisibility sphere. Amos was sitting on a personal flight cloud, rubbing his temples and groaning. Miriam was on Jason immediately, especially when he slipped a little, holding himself unstably with his aura.

“Are you alright?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he groaned. “Tapping into my astral throne is a proper kick in the head, but I’ve gotten used to it.”

Cloud-substance seeped out of the miniature flask on his necklace and formed a chair for him to collapse into.

“I just need to rest,” he said. “I’ll be fine by the time I need to fight.”

“You are *not* doing any more fighting in this battle.”

“He is,” Amos said. “He has to. You must have felt how the tree reacted to him. It knows he’s the one it needs to overcome, and that it can’t beat the demigod, whatever it throws at him. It’s going to challenge Asano the way a messenger would. It’s the only way it can win.”