

Chapter 758

What Kind of Adventurer

The expedition team was standing on a platform that hung over one side of the hole. A strong wind blew through the town and over the aperture, creating a low, ominous roar. No one could resist going to the edge and looking down into the roughly circular chasm that was hundreds of metres across. It was a hungry void, devouring what sunlight made it past the bridges and buildings arching over it.

After peering over the edge, the group gathered to examine the vehicles lined up on the platform, waiting to carry them down. Their construction was rough and industrial, designed and assembled with only function in mind. Each looked like something between a crab and a centipede, with hollow backs that contained space for six plus a driver. The seats reminded Jason of amusement park rides, with bars and belts designed to hold people in place through some wild bucking. There were even roll cages over the top of each seating area.

Allayeth, standing in the middle of the platform with Marcus, grabbed everyone's attention with a burst of aura projection. Once everyone had gathered around, she started talking.

"The crawlers won't be as fast as descending through flight," she explained, "but magical conditions are uncertain. These vehicles are designed to operate with maximal reliability and will continue functioning at very low levels of ambient magic. Only those with essence abilities that allow them to employ specialised magical tools can operate them."

That was a standard concern for low-magic zones and had been the norm in Greenstone. Both Belinda and Clive had appropriate abilities.

"If the crawlers detect extreme magical abnormalities or massive fluctuations in ambient magic," Allayeth continued, "they will automatically secure themselves to the walls. This is to prevent them falling in case of malfunction, and this mode will need to be manually overridden to continue."

"A final reminder of command structure," Marcus said, taking over the briefing. He gestured to the elven leader of the team trained by Allayeth.

"Miriam is your tactical commander. When the fighting starts or something else goes wrong, she is in charge. For secondary commanders, those of you not in teams have already been assigned temporary groups. If you can't remember your assigned sub-commander, please jump in the hole now and save us all some time."

Allayeth gave him a sharp look, an unrepentant shrug the closest he came to accepting her silent criticism.

“Clive Standish is in charge of magical operations and investigation,” Marcus continued. “When the magic gets weird, and it will, you do what he says, when he says it. If you don’t, I won’t need to punish you because you’ll have died like an idiot.”

“Mr Xenoria…” Allayeth said through gritted teeth.

“Lastly,” Marcus continued, “Jason Asano is operations commander. Outside of combat, he has the last word in what you will do and how you will do it. I know that it’s unusual to have a silver-ranker in command of a team with a gold-rank contingent, but it’s appropriate for this operation, given his unique qualifications. He has had more experience with cosmic forces and exotic dimensional spaces in the last six years than the rest of us in our entire careers. Combined, probably. The man got in a knife fight with the Builder when he was iron-rank for gods’ sakes.”

“Strictly speaking, only I had a knife,” Jason said. “Also, it didn’t go well. I mean, we stopped him from activating his world engineers, but he did kill me.”

“Jason,” Arabelle spoke up. “Remember when we talked about focusing on professionalism?”

“Sorry,” Jason said. “Look, everyone, we all know the chain of command; the org chart was in all our packets. Marcus just said he wanted to yell it at everyone so it sank in. As long as you actually read the thing, you know who command falls to if I die or turn into a universe or something, so lets—”

“I’m sorry,” Miriam Vance cut in. “Did you just say you might turn into a universe? It sounded like you said you might turn into a universe, but that would be an insane thing for a person to say because people don’t turn into universes. I can’t help but feel like I’d be more comfortable with an operations commander who understands that.”

“That is exactly why Mr Asano is in charge,” Marcus said. “I did say he had unique qualifications. The fact is, he regularly operates outside of any scenario that makes sense to the rest of us. You may have heard about him convincing the Builder to leave the planet. That’s a simplification, but not inaccurate. I’d also like to thank him for deciding to share some of his considerable secrets.”

“Such as being able to turn into a universe?”

“A small universe,” Jason said. “And to be honest, I’m two-thirds universe already. And I will be honest. Mostly. More or less. The fact is, everyone on this expedition is taking a huge risk, and you deserve something approximating the truth of what we might be walking into. I’ve already shared some of this with Lady Allayeth and representative

Xenoria in the planning stage. And, as I said, I'm on the way to being a living universe. Lady Allayeth has seen it for herself. She's also promised to help me murder any Magic Society pricks who try to kidnap and experiment on me. Just throwing that out there.”

His gaze moved to the Magic Society contingent, his reptilian smile giving them chills.

The crawlers made their way down the walls of the shaft. Just as their appearance suggested, they had been built for practicality over looks or, as became swiftly apparent, comfort. At first, Jason had found it fun, the amusement park seats proving indicative of the ride. A couple of hours in, he reflected that there was a reason park rides only lasted a few minutes. Hanging from the straps and bars holding them in place as the crawlers clunked downwards became very old very fast.

Some of the passengers had means to make things more comfortable. Jason was one of those, calling some cloud stuff from the miniaturised flask on his necklace. It slipped between him and the bars and straps of his seat, smoothing and cushioning his ride. With so many elite gold and silver-rankers, many others likewise had items and abilities that offered comfort. For those that didn't, some requested through Jason's party interface to make their own way down. This was immediately refused by Miriam Vance.

Miriam had joined half of team Biscuit in one of the crawlers so she could continue talking with Jason. They could have used the interface but she wanted to question him in person. Clive was driving, with Humphrey, Sophie, Rufus and Stash as the other passengers. Stash had enjoyed the experience at first, taking the form of a celestine version of an adolescent Humphrey with silver eyes and hair.

It did not take long before Stash started complaining to be let out, Humphrey and Sophie repeatedly calming him down. It was a sign of his growing maturity that he actually stayed put, despite his complaints, instead of turning into a bird and flying off. He did shift his form to be significantly rotund, however.

“It's for cushioning,” he insisted.

The jerky ride where everyone was hanging face down was not conducive to conversation, even through voice chat. But once Jason had padded his ride and Miriam did something similar with an air-conjuration power, she continued probing him with questions.

“So, you're turning into one of the messengers' leaders, but that isn't the same as turning into a messenger?”

“No,” Jason said. “Astral king seems to be an end-state for messenger advancement, but being a messenger isn't a requirement. Messengers are capable of developing the

aspects required to become an astral king naturally, although we don't know how that is triggered. The diamond-rank messengers are all obsessed with that secret, by all accounts."

"But there are unnatural means of developing those aspects?" Miriam asked.

"I'd prefer to use the term artificial," Jason said. "But yes. The elements that make someone an astral king can be acquired through external means. It's the way I'm doing it, and it turns out I'm not the first. Clive dug out some records in the diamond-rank messenger's study that are old even by cosmic standards. These records seem to imply that the messenger race itself originated with astral kings who weren't messengers because the messengers didn't exist yet."

"It's not definitive," Clive called back with a grunt from where he was piloting the crawler. "Is the ride getting any better? I think I'm slowly coming to grips with this thing."

"Not getting better so much as less awful," Sophie told him. "But you're doing well, Clive; keep it up."

Jason smiled to himself as Sophie casually supported her teammate. It was worlds from the porcupine she had been when they first met.

"The documents I found contradict messenger indoctrination, which is some piffle about having always existed as the living will of the universe," Clive continued, his tone distracted as he drove the crawler. "There was reference to messenger precursor astral kings it called 'originals,' although whether they were the actual source of the first messengers I don't know. There was nothing on where the birthing tree planets came from—WHO PUT THAT BLOODY ROCK THERE?"

The crawler jolted hard, slamming Jason against the restraining bar even through his cloud cushioning.

The crawlers moved slower and far less comfortably than the adventurers would have descended under their own power. On reaching a sloped section of the shaft that became almost horizontal for a long stretch, they called a stop to rest. A small army of relieved adventurers got out to stretch their legs, a handful of familiars frolicking around them. Jason and the others from his crawler stood next to it, stretching out their limbs.

"Are you sensing that?" Jason asked Miriam who nodded.

"Elementals," she said. "We were expecting them sooner or later."

Elementals weren't monsters in the strictest sense. They were still the result of a magical manifestation, but rather than form a body entirely from magic, they were real elemental matter, infused with magic. The result was an animated and aggressive mass of

elemental substance. Most elementals were comprised of earth, air, fire or water, but many variants existed based on the environments in which they appeared.

Jason's early career in Greenstone had included mud elementals in the delta and sand elementals in the desert. A silver-rank water elemental known as an elemental tyrant had left the first and still largest of his scars after almost killing him. An elemental had once emerged from the Greenstone sewerage system during Jason's time there, a battle he was grateful to have not participated in.

"I'm only sensing silver-rankers," Jason said. "Given that elementals are as subtle as a bridge collapse with their auras, I don't think I'm missing any gold-rankers amongst them."

"Then you should take them on alone," Humphrey said.

"You can't sense how many there are," Miriam told him. "There are at least a hundred of them."

"Good," Humphrey said. "A lot of the people in this expedition see Jason as a political appointment. Someone who is important to the mission but doesn't have their respect as an adventurer. The way Representative Xenoria introduced him didn't help with that."

"I don't think getting him killed will help with that either," Miriam said.

"It will when he comes back," Sophie muttered. "He always does, usually with some ridiculous new power."

"Commander Vance," Humphrey said. "Jason repeatedly finds himself at the nexus of grand events. This leads people to overlook the fact that he is, in fact, an excellent adventurer. This expedition is filled with guild elites, hand-picked for this mission. I would hold Jason up against any of them. There is a fight coming which makes how to face it your decision. If you want to see what kind of adventurer your operations commander is, now is the safest chance you'll get before the magic goes weird on us."

"Also, he's already gone," Sophie pointed out.

Miriam looked around and saw that Jason had, indeed, slipped away without her aura senses registering his sudden absence.

"How?"

She expanded her senses over the distant elementals, swarming up the tunnel. She noted shadow creatures spreading out amongst them and sensed Asano right in the middle.

Elementals surged upslope along the tunnel, covering the walls, floor and roof. They were all conglomerations of loose elemental material, from formless masses to highly

specific shapes. A mound of earth slid along the tunnel as a deer made of tiny stone fragments pranced alongside it. There was what looked like a child's crude attempt at a clay tortoise, except the size of a small house. A winged gorilla made of magma loped along, taking to the air in long, gliding leaps.

The only light was shed by the more fire-related elementals, mostly magma creatures glowing in the dark. Shade's bodies went unnoticed, but when Jason strolled out of one it was a different story. His cloak of stars shone brightly, draped around him to the point that he looked engulfed in a starry void.

Jason walked with hands clasped leisurely behind his back. A shadow arm drew his sword, Hegemon's Will, that Gary had forged for him. He used his Doom Blade ability, but instead of conjuring a dagger, the power was bestowed on the sword. The rune letters running down the black blade turned from white to red.

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- You have invoked the effects of [Ruin, Blade of Tribulation]. All properties of that weapon have been imbued into [Hegemon's Will]. Necrotic damage will be inflicted in addition to physical damage.
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In contrast to Jason's slow meander, the shadow arm flickered around Jason in a blur of motion, the speed, reach and flexibility beyond what his natural arms could achieve. The blade did little more than scratch the elementals with solid physical forms, while those comprised of fire or smoky ash seemed to flinch from the blade's touch. Each hit landed special attacks, delivering affliction after affliction, Jason chanting spells that did the same.

"Bleed for me."

"Carry the mark of your transgressions."

"Your fate is to suffer."

Elementals surged at Jason only to pass harmlessly through one of Shade's intangible bodies, Jason having already moved on. He didn't rush, always stepping into a Shade body with perfect timing to casually avoid attacks.

The greatest weakness of elementals was their mindlessness, without even the mental capacity of the simplest insect. Combined with the relative slowness of the mostly earth-type elementals, their inability to learn allowed Jason to lead them around by the nose, delivering afflictions with impunity. His mobility moved him from one area of the fight to another, the imbecilic elementals always playing catch up.

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- [Castigate] has inflicted [Mortality], [Sin], [Mark of Sin], and [Weight of Sin]. You have gained [Marshal of Judgement].

- [Haemorrhage] had inflicted [Blood From a Stone], [Bleeding], [Sacrificial Victim] and [Necrotoxin].
 - [Punish] has inflicted [Sin], [Price of Absolution] and [Wages of Sin].
 - [Hand of the Reaper] has inflicted [Weakness of the Flesh], [Creeping Death] and [Rigor Mortis].
 - [Hegemon's Will] has drained mana and inflicted necrotic damage, [Corrosion], [Vulnerable] and [Hegemon's Tribute].
 - [Leech Bite] has refreshed [Bleeding] and inflicted [Leech Toxin] and [Tainted Meridians].
 - [Inexorable Doom] has inflicted [Inexorable Doom], [Inescapable] and [Persecution].
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The oppressive weight of afflictions left stone bleeding and magma rotting like a week-old corpse. The elementals ignored their unnatural suffering, having no sense of fear, pain or even the self-preservation instinct of an animal. They kept pointlessly chasing Jason around as he strolled through them, moving in and out of Shade's bodies.

If Jason went through the elementals one by one, destroying them all would take far too long. He had the endurance for it, able to replenish himself by feeding on afflictions, but it was better to send his dark powers spreading through the enemy.

In a surge of aura, Gordon appeared above Jason's head, his massive, nebulous eye blazing in the dark. His floating orb eyes shot out, seeking out afflicted elementals to sink into. Those elementals immediately started spawning butterflies that carried their afflictions to fresh victims.

Jason had not done well fighting large groups of late. The affliction-spreading butterflies were extremely effective if allowed to do their work, but it was a more complex process than poison clouds or just affecting huge crowds. He lacked the variety of simple and effective methods that traditional affliction specialists had access to, although he found himself not regretting their absence. As an affliction skirmisher, he wasn't stuck behind a team, mindlessly throwing out spells and left helpless if something went wrong.

He considered his independence and versatility well worth the trade-off of not easily and efficiently blanketing an area with his powers. That trade-off was real, however, as the complexity of the afflictions-spreading butterflies as a medium offered a key failure point for intelligent enemies to target. The butterflies were all but unstoppable after reaching a critical mass, but could be shut down with sufficiently swift and diligent action. During the battle of Yaresh, the messengers had been swift to eliminate any butterflies, and even their own monsters once they were affected. This had shut down Jason's ability to have a massive impact on the tactical situation.

The higher rank the enemies, the smarter they tended to be. The elementals were the opposite of intelligent, however, and the butterflies were soon swarming over them in such

a thick cloud it was hard to see. The darkness of the tunnel was gone, the glowing butterflies filling the space with blue and orange light. The display was as beautiful as the results were ugly as stone oozed rotting pus and fire shed black, poisoned blood that was immediately boiled to steam.

The stench of tainted, coppery blood and rancid death filled the air. It would have choked anyone that needed to breathe. The days of Jason failing to bleed enemies just because they had no blood, or to rot enemies because they had no flesh were behind him. His powers made the impossible possible, which was the purpose of magic, after all. The afflicted elementals were now vulnerable to that which they should have been impervious, marking the time to finish things. Jason held out his hands and his palms grew slick with blood that seeped through his skin. A moment later leeches erupted from his hands, geysering over the elementals.

Normally, Colin would not be able to feast on creatures of stone and earth, but Jason's had left them susceptible to his predations. Only the fire and magma elementals could hold him off, their heat slaying any individual leeches that grew close. Jason ignored this, the elementals too stupid to capitalise on it. Colin devoured the others, growing his leech swarm faster than it burned away.

The elementals Colin couldn't devour, Jason took care of. He drained the foul afflictions from all the fire and magma elementals at once, leaving holy afflictions in their place. The clean light of transcendent damage destroyed them from within, eating away at them even faster than the bleeding and the rot. Jason used his execute ability, Verdict, to detonate that power, finishing off the individual elementals that seemed to be holding up the best, like the giant clay tortoise.

From that stage, the massacre ended in short order. Shade was already moving through the dead by the time it was over, touching them to make them lootable.

"This should be a good haul of quintessence," Jason mused.

"Indeed, Mr Asano," Shade agreed. "Miss Farrah and Mr Standish may put them to good use in rituals during our time underground."

Jason triggered the loot, rainbow smoke rising from the remains of the elementals. Unlike ordinary silver-rank monsters, this did not eliminate the bodies entirely. Aside from those annihilated by transcendent damage, the elemental substance remained, stained and deformed with blood and necrosis that shouldn't have been possible. Remnants painted the walls and dripped from the roof, Jason's cloak deflecting rancid gobbets as he stood amongst the remains, judiciously pouring crystal wash down the length of his fouled blade.