

## Chapter 768

### Humungous Hairy Hands

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

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

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

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

"I heard you were disinclined to trust gods."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, Jason?"

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

"What's an orangutan?"

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

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

"I am not—"

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

"—A BLOODY MELEE WEAPON!"

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

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

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

"Good job, Stash," Rick said happily.

"This is a pile of heidel shi—"

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes!"

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

“Thank you Stash, dear,” she said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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