

Chapter 720

A More Practical Purpose

The mushroom cloud of dust and ash covered a huge area, and all around it, teams of adventurers were clashing with the messengers altered by elemental power. One of the first things Jason had done on coming into contact with one was to touch his hand to it briefly.

Converted Messenger (ash, silver rank)

- Messenger abilities suppressed.
- Able to conjure ash bombs.

The elemental messengers were noticeably weaker than the regular variety, most evident in their lack of aura control. Instead of the usual precise and oppressive force, their auras lashed out in waves of suppressive power, strong but inconsistent. Any well-trained adventurer could handle the intermittent spiritual attacks, fending off what was normally a messenger's strongest weapon.

They were also lacking in intellect; reduced to animalistic instincts. They understood enough to work in tandem, but failed to move beyond placing the strong ones at the front and the destructive ones at the rear. They failed to adapt to any strategy but the most obvious, allowing the adventurers to get the upper hand.

On the ground, Clive and Farrah were standing at the edge of a circle of scorched earth. The blast that created the mushroom cloud had levelled a huge area of rainforest and Farrah had burned away the felled trees and crushed undergrowth to create a space for Clive to work. He drew a cubic ritual diagram from sparkling golden light, a box comprised of framework lines and floating sigils.

As he worked, a stray gobbet of magma the size of a motorcycle plunged through the air towards the cube. A stream of blue and orange light shot in from the side and transformed into Jason's familiar, Gordon. One of the orbs floating around Gordon turned into a shield and intercepted the attack.

"Thank you, Gordon," Farrah called up at him. He responded with a complex strobing of his orbs before turning back into a light stream and flashing away.

"Do have any idea what that flashy-light language means?" Farrah asked Clive. "I have a translation power, now, and I'm getting nothing."

"I also have a translation power, and I have no idea. Do you think Jason is just pretending to understand it?"

"No," Farrah said. "He'd do that to us, but he wouldn't do it to Gordon."

After completing the diagram, Clive chanted a brief incantation. Flames ran across the lines of the box for a moment before sputtering out almost immediately. He and Farrah walked around the cube that was twice as tall as they were, looking it over.

"Seems sound, Farrah said.

"Give it a test?" Clive suggested.

Farrah cast her Fire Bolt spell and the box absorbed it, much like she had the powers of the fire messengers. The flames were dispersed across the lines and sigils before being drawn in and vanishing. Farrah pointed out a section where the golden lines had dimmed noticeably as they drew in the fire.

"You might want to touch that up," she said.

"I saw it," Clive agreed. He redrew the section and repeated the incantation. Another test showed that the weak area had been repaired.

"Do we do a proper field test of this one first?" Farrah asked, "or go straight to the other three."

"Let's field test," Clive said. "It should be able to hold one."

They looked up at the sky where messengers and adventurers still clashed in the air. They both had sufficiently acute vision to pick out the distant figures, at least those close enough to not be entirely obscured by dust. Farrah pointed, using her aura to guide Clive's eyes.

"That one."

"Okay," Clive said.

Farrah moved into the cube, the golden lines tingling her body as they passed through her and strobing for a moment once they had. She stood in the middle of the cube, looking up. Clive pointed one arm at her and another to the sky and then incanted a spell.

"Exchange your fates."

Farrah vanished and was replaced with a fire-type messenger, while she appeared in his place up in the sky. Now at the back of a messenger formation, she opened up on them with her strongest attacks. Down below, the flame messenger was barely phased by the abrupt translocation, firing a blast of flame from its hands almost immediately.

Clive raised an eyebrow as fire struck the edge of the box. Instead of passing through the open space between the lines of the magical cage, the flames were contained by an invisible barrier. The fire messenger charged forward, bouncing off the same barrier.

“Adequate,” Clive assessed, then proceeded to draw a second cube next to the first.

“That’s a lot of butterflies,” Jason said as he floated in the air, looking at a wall of blue and orange. The butterflies were so thick that they were obscuring the messengers behind them. Many of the butterflies were destroyed by attacks from the messengers, exploding in colourful blasts of disruptive-force energy. The gaps were swiftly filled as more butterflies spawned from the already-afflicted messengers.

“Is there some kind of limit on how many butterflies you can have?” Taika asked. He was back in his human form but had a pair of golden wings holding him aloft.

“Not numerically,” Jason explained. “They aren’t actual living things; they’re energy constructs that look and behave somewhat like butterflies. They come from an affliction that Gordon’s orbs can inflict. The affliction continually takes tiny bits of mana from the target and turns them into the butterflies. The butterflies carry all the afflictions of the person they were created from, including the one that creates more butterflies. If the butterflies can find an enemy before the bit of mana they’re made of runs out, they dump all the afflictions on the fresh victim. If not, they peter out.”

“Bro, I don’t want to sound like I’m on the other team, here, but I think it sounds better when you call them enemies, not victims. Otherwise, it sounds like you’re rounding them up to do experiments on.”

Jason pointedly avoided looking down towards what Clive was doing.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he said slightly too casually.

“How do the butterflies know who’s an enemy?” Taika asked.

“You know, I have a few powers that only affect enemies, or affect them differently from allies. I’ve never figured out to my satisfaction how they tell the difference. It almost has to be some kind of aura interaction, but that raises a lot of questions. As a test, I’ve tried forcing myself to think of something as an enemy when it, strictly speaking, was not.”

“Some *thing*, not someone?”

“I thought it would be best to try it on the most disdainful, despicable thing I could conceive of, to make it easier to think of as an enemy, even though it technically wasn’t.”

“What did you go with?”

“Frozen meals for one.”

“You might want to try it on a person, bro.”

“That never seemed very ethical.”

“That’s a good point; the whole victims-versus-enemies thing. You know, you could probably wipe out a whole city with those butterflies. If the city was full of your enemies.”

“Being in a city full of enemies is something I’ll generally try to avoid.”

“You say that bro, but we all know what you’re like. It’ll probably happen and it’ll probably be your fault.”

“You think there’s a city full of people that hate me that much?”

“Bro, you blasted Metallica over the battlefield. I bet you freaked a lot of people out.”

“That does not warrant a city full of mortal foes.”

“Also, I don’t think you picked the right song to start with. It was okay, but I would have opened with *Master of Puppets* or *Trapped Under Ice*. Or maybe mix it up with some AC/DC. *Thunderstruck* would be awesome to have a fight to.”

“I’m waiting to fight someone with lightning powers to use that one.”

“Bro, if the bloke you’re fighting is the one with the lightning powers, wouldn’t *Thunderstruck* be you putting on a soundtrack for the other guy to kick the crap out of you instead of the other way around?”

“Huh,” Jason mused. “You might be right.”

“You should put it on now and we’ll go find some more bad guys.”

“No, most of the remaining messengers are all staying in the cloud. They’re aggressive but not completely unintelligent, and they’ve seen how badly they’re losing against the adventurers.”

“You can sense around the whole cloud?”

“Yeah. Hasn’t your perception started filtering the sensations to get a better handle on the situation?”

“Nah, bro. That sounds like some next-level stuff.”

“Well, you’re silver-rank now; welcome to the next level. Do some meditation practise and see how it goes.”

“Bro, I’m flying in the air and we’re still in a battle.”

“Think of it like spiritual resistance training. I’ll be your spotter.”

Taika’s expression turned thoughtful.

“Like doing bench presses with your soul.”

“Exactly,” Jason said. “Which leads me to one question: do you even lift, bro?”

“Bro, that’s ice cold. Okay, let’s do this.”

They flew over to Onslow’s shell and Taika sat cross-legged atop it, eyes closed. Jason stood watching over him for a moment, then some cloud material spilled out from the shrunken cloud flask hanging around his neck. It formed a chair for Jason to settle into, eating a sandwich and leafing through a book as he watched over Taika.

Rufus teleported onto the shell in a flash of silvery moonlight.

“What are you doing?” he asked Jason.

“It’s meditation training,” Jason said.

Rufus’ eyes rested on the sandwich.

“Yes, it looks like you’re engrossed in contemplating the mysteries of the cosmos.”

Jason gently waved the book in his hand.

“This is astral magic theory, so technically, I am. And the bad guys are pretty much done for; we’re just letting the familiars get some practise in before the butterflies finish all the stragglers.”

As Jason suggested, Gordon was floating around with Belinda’s lantern familiar, shooting beams and bolts of force at messengers rapidly rotting away under the weight of Jason’s afflictions. Stash was also present, in the form of what looked to Jason like a woodpecker the size of a bulldozer. He hovered in place, wings buzzing like a hummingbird as his beak pounded at an earth-type messenger like a jackhammer. He quickly gave up on that approach, however, spitting out gobbets of rot caused by the afflictions.

“You could just join Taika,” Jason suggested to Rufus.

“It does seem like it would be good perception training, trying to push your senses through all this obstruction,” Rufus acknowledged. He was moving to sit down when Jason stood up suddenly, the cloud chair returning to the flask as he put away the book.

“What is it?” Rufus asked.

“The fight just finished,” Jason said.

“What do you mean?” Rufus asked, then turned his head as he sensed what Jason already had: two diamond-rank auras moving through the air at blinding speed.

Charist and Allayeth had arrived from Yaresh, Charist flying superhero style while Allayeth sat in what looked like a throne made from glittering lights. They slowed down and split up as they approached the massive cloud. Charist gained altitude and vanished into the murk as Allayeth descended, making her way to one of the gold-rank adventurers for a quick discussion.

“We should regroup,” Humphrey announced through voice chat. “How are things on the ground, Clive?”

“We’re more or less at capacity here,” Clive said.

“Very well, we’ll converge on you. Jason, it might be time for you to take in that...”

He paused before reluctantly finishing.

“...‘music’ device.”

“Bro,” Taika said as he got to his feet. “I think Humphrey might like old man music. Do you have any Foster and Allen?”

“No,” Jason said. “I do have some young people music made so long ago that the people who made it are old now. Do you think he’d like the Hollies?”

“If he doesn’t,” Farrah said, “I’m not sure he’s on the right team.”

“You don’t get to say that,” Humphrey told her. “You’re not even on this team.”

“She’s right about the Hollies, though,” Sophie said.

“Do you even know who that is?” Humphrey asked.

“Humpy, Jason and Farrah brought back a whole different world worth of music. Have you not listened to any of it?”

There was resounding silence in the voice chat until finally, Gary spoke up, his voice trepidatious.

“Did you just call him Humpy?”

“No,” Sophie said, uncharacteristically flustered.

“No!” Humphrey said, just as fast.

Everyone fell silent again, each person connected to the voice chat almost hearing Humphrey’s sweat as they waited for Jason to voice an opinion of Humphrey’s new nickname.

“Well, I think it’s sweet they’re becoming more comfortable as a couple,” Jason said.

“Gary, where are you?”

“I’m riding to the ground by holding onto a messenger. I’ve left his wings alone so he can fly but I’m too heavy in my armour and we’re descending steadily. I figured out that if you hold one leg and one arm, you can kind of steer them.”

“Isn’t the messenger attacking you?” Humphrey asked, eagerly jumping into Jason’s merciful change of subject.

“Yeah, but it’s one of the fire ones,” Gary said. “It’s not accomplishing much. The heat’s making my undies a little swampy.”

As they chatted, Jason, Taika and Rufus moved from atop Onslow’s shell to the inside with Neil and Belinda as it descended towards the ground. The sound projector floated down and into the shell as well, as directed by a control device Jason took out. He waited for the last song to finish before removing the recording crystal and turning it off, however.

They reached the ground and disembarked from Onslow’s shell, which shrank down to encase the familiar who resumed his normal tortoise form. Clive and Farrah were

standing by what were now four cubic cages, set out in a square. Each one was crowded with around a dozen messengers, each cube holding a different type, trapped and alive.

“That seems to have gone well,” Jason said.

“You weren’t the one who had to keep going in to be switch-teleported,” Farrah complained. “It got very unpleasant as they filled up.”

Jason turned his head as he felt Allayeth attention fall on them. A few seconds later she arrived in a blur of her sparkling throne. She stepped off of it and took a small bottle from a dimensional pouch at her waist. She unstopped it and the cloud of lights was drawn in, after which she sealed the bottle and put it away.

“What do you have here?” she asked, looking over the arrangement of prison cubes.

“It’s a prison array,” Farrah explained. “It cyclically employs the elemental energy of the prisoners to reinforce the array. The prisoners themselves fuel their imprisonment through an energy drain that keeps them from having the power to break out. It only works because there are distinct elemental forces with uniform subsets that we can use to cycle the energy. You can’t suppress elemental power with the same element.”

“And you just happened to have a ritual array for exactly that?”

“Farrah is the array specialist,” Clive said. “I just helped tweak the specifics.”

“Meaning that I had an idea and Clive figured out how to make it work in about four minutes by himself instead of four weeks with a research team,” Farrah classified.

“Interesting,” Allayeth said. “We should leave that discussion for now, however. Jason, I understand you have some kind of sound projector?”

“Yep. You want to make a request?”

“Tina Turner,” Farrah suggested. “You don’t know musicians from Jason’s world, so just trust me.”

“Thank you,” Allayeth said, “but I had a more practical purpose in mind.”

Allayeth took a recording crystal from Jason, made an announcement into it and then placed it into the projector and tossed it into the air. Her voice spread out, warning the adventurers to move away from the cloud.

Shortly after the announcement began repeating on a loop, a vast force of elemental wind appeared to everyone’s senses, high in the sky. A massive vortex had formed and was drawing in the cloud, sucking it high into the sky. The adventurers who had been moving away from the cloud started moving faster, but a few were still sucked up with the cloud. Allayeth tilted her head back, sighing as she looked at the vortex, barely visibly beyond the chaotically swirling cloud.

“He could have waited a little bit,” she said. “No patience, that man.”

“Out of curiosity,” Jason asked, “how would you have warned everyone if you didn't have my sound projector?”

“I wouldn't.”

“Okay,” Jason said. “And now I know you a little better.”

“Are you suggesting that I'm callous?”

“Definitely not,” Jason said firmly.

“Good.”

“Because I don't want to get sucked into a wind vortex like the sound projector you borrowed,” he mumbled.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.”

“It didn't sound like nothing.”

“Oh look: there's a gold-ranker flying over here. He probably needs to talk to you about something very important.”