

Chapter 663

Voice of the Will

Sophie was taking a firm stance against studying the worms rather than eradicating them on site.

“Do you want some lunatic researcher trying to do what the messengers did and use them as a weapon?”

“It’s a good point,” Belinda agreed. “Imagine what Evil Clive could do if he got his hands on these things.”

“Evil Clive?” Clive asked.

“Lindy, I thought you *were* Evil Clive,” Jason said.

“Oh, that’s sweet of you,” Belinda happily replied, touching his shoulder briefly.

“Sophie’s right,” Humphrey said. “All it takes is some Duke who is long on ambition and short on both morals and sense. They set up their own breeding program, somewhere no one finds it. It gets out of control, the worms get loose and by the time anyone realises, it’s too late. The world-taker worms have too much momentum and live up to the name. Even if they can be stopped, the price in lives is high. I’m not saying that our actions alone will be enough to avoid that outcome, but I’m not willing to do anything to make it any more likely.”

“Do you practise portentous monologues in the mirror for when these situations come up?” Jason asked. “Because seriously, that was on point. I’ve tried practising sinister lines that I can use later, but I had to knock it off because I’m waaay too melodramatic. It should be simple and concise, like ‘I’m Batman,’ but I always end up veering into ‘I am the terror that flaps in the night’ territory. So now I just wing it so I don’t get carried away.”

“You still get carried away,” Belinda said.

“I do?”

“A bit.”

“A bit nothing,” Clive said. “Do you want me to play the speech you gave that messenger?”

“Play it?”

Clive pointed to the mana crystals floating over his head from his Crystallise Mana ability.

Ability: [Crystallise Mana] (Magic)

➤ Conjunction (restoration).

- Base cost: Low.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Silver 4 (04%).

 - Effect (iron): Create a crystal that floats around you, accelerating mana recovery. Crystal is impervious to damage, but vulnerable to dispel effects. If dispelled, crystals grant an immediate burst of mana. You can have a single mana crystal at a time.

 - Effect (bronze): Crystals can intercept magical projectiles, negating their effect. For a period after negating a projectile, a crystal becomes inactive, unable to produce mana or intercept further projectiles. Maximum crystal count is increased to three, with each active crystal cumulatively increasing mana recovery.

 - Effect (silver): Each crystal can absorb one projectile while negating its effect. Crystal with an absorbed projectile will consume the projectile's energy to increase mana production. Absorbed projectiles can be redirected at enemies, with the effects diminished based on the amount of projectile energy converted into mana. Maximum crystal count is increased to five.
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Humphrey had the same, with he and Neil both sharing the very common ability with Clive. But where five crystals were floating over Humphrey's head, Clive had a sixth. When he pointed this out, they all recognised it as a recording crystal.

"Do you want me to show the others?" Clive asked.

"It wasn't that bad," Jason insisted.

"Why don't we let the others see it, then?"

"Because it's embarrassing, and they know how dramatic I can get. And we need to deal with these worms, which leads to an important question: Do I feed Colin the colourful ones first or the big one?"

"There's a lot of Colin to go around," Belinda said. "Why not both?"

Jason shrugged and started moving from vat to vat. They each had a sealed opening on the metal top that Jason presumed was for extracting worms and feeding nutrients. He used it for dumping in leeches, most of which went into the central vat. The smells that came out from the vats as he opened the seals were rancid.

"Ooh, that's rough," Jason said. Then he took a step back as the obese worm in the central vat banged against the inside of the glass.

"Are we okay with it doing that?" Clive asked. "Things breaking containment in magical laboratories have historically had less-than-ideal results."

"I'm open to suggestions," Humphrey said.

“Is running away on the table?” Belinda asked. “I did not like the smell coming out of those tanks. Couldn’t we just go back up the entry shaft and drop stuff down to kill the worms?”

“I’m not running away from what amounts to a giant sausage,” Sophie said. “A sausage that is being enthusiastically devoured, no less.”

As Sophie said, the leeches in the vat were aggressively chewing into the worm. Red blood was staining the sickly yellow fluid, making the contents of the vat murkier with each passing moment. Gaping wounds were easy to spot as the worm slammed itself against the glass of the vat, sometimes squashing leeches in the process. The life force Colin was consuming allowed him to reproduce faster than he was losing leeches.

“There’s a lot of life force in that worm,” Jason observed. “I don’t think I’ve ever felt Colin quite so enthused. You show them who’s the best apocalypse beast, Colin! Also, please don’t eat any planets.”

The others all turned to look at him.

“What?” Jason asked. “I said *don’t* eat any planets.”

“Are we all sure we aren’t the villains here?” Belinda asked. “Am I Evil Clive?”

The worm slammed its torn and bleeding body against the vat again, causing spiderweb cracks to appear.

“That’s not good,” Jason said as the cracks rapidly spread. The team all floated off the floor and away from the cracking portion of the vat.

Any well-trained silver ranker could slowly move themselves around, just without the speed, power and control of Jason or a messenger. They also had to maintain careful concentration or they would drop.

The vat broke, spilling yellow liquid onto the floor. It was thick, almost slime, and heavily streaked with red. The worm only half emerged, getting caught on the broken glass and cutting itself open. A foul smell emerged the moment the vat broke, but when the worm suffered deep lacerations, it became excruciatingly pungent. The only stench any of them had encountered that was worse was rainbow smoke. They all shut off their sense of smell as soon as the wall of stench struck them.

“Okay, Lindy,” Sophie choked out. “I was wrong. We should have run away.”

“I have no expertise in magical research, or in eating worms,” Rufus said. “I’ll leave this to Jason and Clive.”

With that, he floated himself up through the elevating platform shaft in the ceiling, Sophie, Belinda and Humphrey following close behind. Jason looked at Clive, whose

expression was torn. There might be something to learn if he stayed, or it might just be some leeches eating some worms which he could happily imagine in the fresh air.

“I think whatever’s in those vats is making my eyes sting,” Clive said, making his decision. “Tell me if anything interesting happens.”

Jason shook his head with a chuckle as Clive made good his escape. The leeches in the side vats had finished their meals and he let them out, but didn’t absorb them immediately.

“If you think I’m letting you inside me while you’re covered in gunk,” he said, holding up a leech with his thumb and forefinger, “you’ve got another thing coming.”

With the elevating platform still downstairs, the shaft was open and Jason was able to extend his aura through it. He used it to grab the barrel of crystal wash, leftover from cleaning off the prisoners, and float it down the shaft. A little of the wash went a long way, so it was still mostly full. While Jason was moving the barrel, Colin finished off the large worm.

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- Familiar [Colin] has consumed [World-Taker Worm Matriarch].
 - [Colin] can use the devoured power of the [World-Taker Worm Matriarch] to awaken as a Voice of the Will. This will require extended hibernation in the astral kingdom to which it is connected. Only passive, unmanifested abilities will be available during this time, and manifestation will be impossible
 - Familiar [Colin] must fully return to the Astral Kingdom to initiate awakening.
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“Voice of the Will? I keep adding to the list of things I need to ask the messengers. I’ll have to leave one alive. Eventually. If I can find one that isn’t in the middle of committing war crimes. Still, far be it from me to look a power upgrade in the mouth. Come and get cleaned up buddy.”

Jason started floating individual leeches into the air with his aura until they surrounded him like a swarm of bees.

“Hey, I think we might have just found a great new tactic, Colin. This is going to scare the crap out of people.”

While holding the leeches in the air, Jason used his aura to start lifting droplets of crystal wash from the barrel to clean them.

“You know what? This is pretty good aura manipulation practise. You’re so useful, Colin. Good boy.”

Jason emerged from the shaft into the workshop. Belinda and Clive were exploring the messenger's work while Sophie, Humphrey and Rufus stood around. The underground workshop was hardly pleasant, but it was a better place to wait for the Adventure Society than the town full of corpses. Just as Jason reached the top of the shaft, Neil appeared through the portal Jason had left open.

"Lindy," he said. "We could use some logistical aid. The Adventure Society has been expanding the refugee camp in the camping grounds with people evacuated from other towns and villages. The cloud palace is being used for assessment and treatment, but we could use some housing."

Belinda nodded and followed Neil back through the portal. Neil had grabbed Belinda for her ability to conjure simple items. That ranged from tools like a sword, a pickaxe or a wall to soft items like curtains or bedding. With Belinda being silver rank, she could conjure a vast number of simple objects that would last for a considerable time. Knocking out what amounted to a series of pre-fab dormitories would be well within her abilities, freeing up time and resources that local authorities could expend on longer-term solutions.

At the same time, more adventuring teams were heading for towns like the one Jason's team had purged. Following close behind were support teams from the Adventure Society, Magic Society, various churches and the Yaresh civic authorities. Reports had come in quickly, from Carlos and others connected to alternate scout teams. Once the magnitude of what was going on had been revealed, resources and personnel were deployed in far greater numbers than the original scout teams. More towns needed to be checked, some teams required backup and everywhere would require management in the aftermath.

The other major concern was what the messengers would do now that what was clearly meant to be an invasion force had been discovered.

"What will the messengers do, now that their plans have been revealed?" Humphrey mused.

"I don't know," Rufus said. "Given the scale of this operation, though, they had to have known that exposure was inevitable. The question is what they planned when that happened. This isn't anything the Adventure Society won't have considered, though. They'll be reinforcing the operation sites for the clean-up in case the whole idea was to bait out teams that could be taken down in isolation by messenger strike groups."

"But doesn't that draw a lot of forces out of the city?" Jason asked. "What if that's the whole point of all this?"

“It’s not like the city will be emptied out,” Rufus said. “I guarantee you that forces in less critical operations are being recalled as we speak. Plus, the city’s defensive infrastructure is a massive impediment to even a concentrated messenger assault.”

“Does that make anyone else feel like messenger saboteurs are bringing down that infrastructure as we speak?” Jason asked.

“Now that you say it, yeah,” Sophie said. “Good job, Rufus.”

Rufus gave Jason a flat look.

“Where did you even learn all this about city infrastructure and defence protocols and the like?” Jason asked.

“My family runs a... get bent, Jason.”

The others all laughed as Jason headed for the stairs. As the one with the strongest senses, he would be the one to first notice the reinforcements. As the workshop was impeding his perception, he needed to go outside.

“I could have used a drink, too,” he muttered.