

Chapter 691

An Extremely Annoying Catalyst

Sophie and Humphrey returned to the relative safety of Onslow's hollow flying shell. Jason performing some insane act was an inevitability, and once he had, the monsters went mad. Some continued towards the ground, the control of the summoners managing to hold. Others snapped the leash and fled back up the way they had come, or flew about randomly in a confused frenzy.

"I have a feeling we should get to Jason," Humphrey announced. "I suspect that he'll soon be the centre of some extremely unpleasant attention."

"We can barely tell which way is up," Clive said, right as the shell was rocked by an impact.

"I'm confident we'll find which way is down if we don't do something," Belinda said as she looked out the side.

"Did a monster just ram us?" Sophie asked.

"Yes," Neil said, also leaning to peer out and up. "A particularly large summoned monster has rammed the wind barrier protecting the shell and had its face shredded for the effort."

"At least it had a face," Belinda said. "How is the barrier holding up?"

"Onslow can maintain it so long as I keep feeding him mana," Clive said. "The ritual enhancing his ability is inside the shell, so we don't have to worry about that unless the monsters use some extremely powerful dispel magic. I have no idea if the messenger summons can do that."

"These messenger summons are weird," Belinda said. "Have you seen the ones that are just a bunch of metal rings spinning around each other? How do they even fight?"

"They slowly charge up infrequent but extremely powerful force beam attacks," Humphrey said. "I was prioritising any that targeted Onslow, and I saw Sophie deflecting the others that I didn't get to."

Another heavy impact rocked the shell.

"Onslow isn't indestructible," Sophie pointed out. "We need to move."

Clive gave Onslow's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. His familiar, when separated from his shell, was a child-sized humanoid tortoise. In that form, Onslow supplemented his usual elemental attacks with weaponised adorableness. Stash, who currently looked identical except for a bushy moustache, handed Onslow half of a salad sandwich.

"Where did you get that?" Neil asked Stash.

"Uncle Jason."

"Did you just call him *Uncle Jason*?" Neil asked.

"No," Stash said with the complete yet casually dismissive conviction of an inveterate liar.

"Not exactly the most time-critical conversation," Humphrey told Neil.

"I know. But where was he keeping the sandwich, though?"

"Onslow," Humphrey said, "please take us down, towards Jason and Rufus on the ground."

"Stash doesn't have a dimensional space," Neil said.

"We've been headed down for a while," Clive told Humphrey. "It's just hard to tell amongst all these summons."

"Or a dimensional bag," Neil continued.

"Is anyone else sensing those messenger auras in amongst the monsters?" Sophie asked.

"Not even a regular bag."

"We can all sense the messenger auras," Belinda said. "We've been able to since they started suppressing all the adventurers, and it's even worse now half of them have gone berserk."

"Maybe a discreet satchel? Stash, do you have a satchel?"

"Neil, could you maybe let it go, just for now?" Humphrey asked.

"You know, don't you?" Neil accused Humphrey. "Does he keep his sandwiches somewhere disgusting?"

"It could be a shape-shifter thing," Belinda suggested. "Maybe he shape-shifts a hidden orifice every time he changes form. A secret flesh crevice."

"Ew," Sophie said. "Please never say 'flesh crevice' again. That's gross."

Belinda gave Sophie a disbelieving look.

"What?" Sophie asked her.

"I once saw you beat a man's head to pulp using a different man's head," Belinda said.

"So?"

"So, being disgusted by the term flesh crevice seems a little odd after some of the stuff you've done."

"I just then asked you not to say that again."

"HEY!" Humphrey bellowed. "Can I remind you that there's still a battle going on?"

“Oh, yeah,” Belinda said. “Sophie you said something about the messengers... Neil, what are you doing?”

Neil and his moustachioed twin looked up guiltily from where they were peering suspiciously at each other's bodies.

“What?” They asked simultaneously.

“The messengers,” Sophie said. “They were holding back before Jason's little display. Now there are a bunch of them dropping like stones right towards him. It's easy to spot them because their auras are spiked with rage.”

They all turned their attention to the auras of the messengers, glowing like embers amongst the summoned monsters. As Sophie had pointed out, a good number of them had lit up their auras and started plunging towards the ground.

“We should move faster,” Humphrey said. “Onslow, can you speed up?”

“He's a tortoise,” Clive said. “Slow is, dare I say it, kind of their thing.”

“He also flies and shoots lightning bolts, Clive,” Humphrey pointed out. “I can confidently state that Onslow is superior to the ordinary tortoise.”

“I'll ask,” Clive said sceptically and turned to Onslow. “What do you say, little buddy? Can you get us down any faster?”

The diminutive familiar threw his arms up and let out a sound that was something between a chirp and a cheer. Then the team hit the ceiling in undignified fashion as the shell dropped like a missile. Only Onslow and Sophie were the exceptions, with Onslow remaining adhered to the floor as if glued. As for Sophie, in the instant of acceleration, her reflexes and agility allowed her to flip and land on the ceiling in a crouch.

Marek Nior Vargas wasn't happy. There was no longer any denying that the man he suspected to be Jason Asano actually was. He was also, like an extremely annoying catalyst, the cause of Marek's other problems. Asano's spectacular reveal meant that the Voice of the Will would have some uncomfortable questions as to how Marek had failed to notice Asano before he had blasted his presence across the city.

Marek lamented that he wasn't a diamond-ranker that could put in the absolute minimum effort, the way he sensed Mah Go Schaat doing. He would need to go investigate Asano, as instructed, despite not caring at all about the man or Jes Fin Kaal's plans for him. If he was lucky, the voice would deploy someone herself before he had the chance.

As commander of a portion of the messenger forces, Marek was going to get his silver-rankers in order. Strictly speaking, Asano was the priority, but Marek had the

discretion to reorder priorities in the field should events grow sufficiently extreme. With a full third of his messenger subordinates gone berserk or near-catatonic, he counted that as meeting the sufficiency threshold.

He proudly noted that none of his personally-trained troops had lost their minds except for Mari Gah Rahnd, and she was always somewhat unique. He strongly suspected that she was fine, faking a berserk rage so she could rush down at Asano because it seemed interesting. If she wasn't the best fighter he had by far, Marek would have kicked her from his personal cadre long ago.

Marek ordered the messengers that had retained their equanimity into action, sending them to round up the others. He did not begrudge the frenzied messengers their rage as he fully understood it. Those who broke, either driven to fury or left reeling and immobile, were the ones whose worlds had just been shaken to the core. Astral kings were very big on indoctrinating fresh messengers, keeping them compliant with the promise and purpose.

Once they left the shelter of the astral kingdoms, the sense of superiority now instilled in the messengers kept them dismissing anything that contradicted what they had been taught. Marek knew from experience that without a good leader to help break those dangerous ideas, a messenger was left with the exact mental fragility that Asano had just exploited.

Despite himself, Marek found him respecting the tactic. Asano had demonstrated an understanding of both the nature of the messengers and the exploitable nature of blind faith that was surprising, allowing him to turn that insight into a weapon. Marek was no uncritical believer in standard messenger doctrine, but even he was shaken by what the man had shown off.

What Asano demonstrated flew wildly in the face of what freshly created messengers were taught. Marek had been lucky enough to find himself under a leader who showed him that the indoctrination was judicious with the truth, but he never imagined the reality he saw now. While he accepted that the truth had been bent, he at least believed in the path of power laid out before them. Asano was a living impossibility, showing what may well be an alternate pathway not just for himself, but for any messenger that could snare those secrets.

Marek felt the temptation to go after Asano himself and quickly realised that he was not the only one to have that thought. All around the city he sensed gold-ranked messengers abandoning their stations and heading in Asano's direction, their adventurer counterparts either charging after them or exploiting their absence. None of that compared

to Mah Go Schaat, however, the diamond-ranker moving so fast he almost vanished from Marek's senses. It was a speed that, for most practical purposes, was the next best thing to teleportation.

Mah Go Schaat was certain that the thoughts going through his mind were replicated in most, if not all of the gold-rank messengers in the city. They all knew that the Voice of the Will had placed the utmost priority on Asano, and it was becoming evident why. Even if they didn't understand what he was, the way Schaat did, they saw that he represented: a path to power that was alike, yet also different from that known to the messengers. In difference there was knowledge, and that knowledge might help them unlock the secrets that would lead them to become astral kings.

Jes Fina Kaal had not told Schaat about Asano, but little escaped the attention of his diamond-rank senses. As soon as the aura projection happened, he heard the name on the lips of the gold-rankers under instruction to capture the man. Many of the gold-rankers were already moving, but he suspected they might not be so eager to share Asano with Kaal, now that his potential had been revealed.

That the gold-rankers had the jump on him mattered nothing to Schaat. The busy city would obstruct them, however little that might be, a problem he did not share. No gold-ranker was a match for his speed and he could barrel through any obstacle like it was vapour.

Schaat started to move and the world slowed down around him. The effect wasn't a power but a passive effect of his diamond-rank speed. His perception accelerated to match his pace so he didn't just crater into the ground. He flew through the forest of monsters, messengers and adventurers, the two diamond-rank adventurers moving in pursuit. He stopped for no obstacle, any monsters, messengers or adventurers he struck turning into blood mist without so much as bumping him slightly off angle. He passed through a building, leaving only a dust-filled tunnel.

He found Asano standing on the ground, the remnant energy of his intrinsic-mandate ritual hanging in the air above him. When he stopped, the world should have returned to a normal pace as his perception normalised to a practical speed. Instead, everything that was moving slowed even more, the world around him coming to a halt.

"Mah Go Schaat," a voice said from behind him. He didn't sense anything, which was terrifying for a diamond-ranker. He turned, focusing his attention on the woman standing there. With something to focus on, his magical senses managed to pick her up, albeit barely. As best he could tell she was a half-transcendent, having reached the maximal

stage of diamond rank. That left Schaat in the extremely unusual position of coming second in power.

He looked around at a world that had completely frozen, at least to his subjective senses. This woman had accelerated both of their time streams enough that they were operating outside of normal time. His gaze ran up and down her body, which was that of an elf in simple tan pants and a pale green blouse. Her hair was a lighter brown than her skin, and flecked with green. Her eyes were amber, bright to the point that they almost seemed to be glowing.

He frowned as his slow examination ended without his time-stream returning to normal. She seemed satisfied to wait.

“Your ability to manipulate time is good,” he said. “Too good. You serve the Sand.”

“I do,” she said. Her voice was soft and melodious. Schaat could not help but feel that she was tamping down a natural playfulness to her tone.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“A favour.”

“What favour do you want from me?”

“The favour isn’t from you, Mah Go Schaat, nor is this the time to request it. Leave Asano be. Turn around and leave this city.”

“There is more than I coming for him.”

“The rest he can handle.”

“Are you sure? It’s a lot of people who are a lot more powerful than he is.”

“It always is, and he always manages.”

“Who are you, and what do you want with him?”

“I am Raythe, and I have told you as much of my intentions as you need to know. Leave or die.”

“I’m not so easy to kill, even for someone like you.”

“That’s alright,” she told him. “I have time.”

Jason and Rufus were looking up at the sky along with the elven affliction specialist, Elseth Culie. There were other adventurers scattered around them, having taken shelter from the messenger auras in the protective bubble of Jason's spiritual aegis. Monsters were still coming down, although in far lesser amounts, and seemed to be focusing on any area except where Jason was.

Elseth quickly directed the adventurers to spread out and fight. Those who had not been shielded by Jason were still woozy from the messenger auras, impeding their combat effectiveness. Elseth herself was already sending out affliction-laden spells.

"The messengers will get them back under control sooner rather than later," Rufus said. "We need to be ready for a fresh surge."

"I still don't understand what just happened," Elseth said between incantations.

"You remember how I said I was a cook?" Jason asked her. "This was basically a Friday night fry-up, except it was war. I grabbed what I had, chucked it together and did my best."

"That was terrible," Rufus told him. "That analogy doesn't land at all."

"I know," Jason said with a grimace. "I could tell while I was saying it, but I thought I could turn it around. Be cool with understated mysteriousness, you know?"

"They can't all be winners," Rufus said. "I think the monster attacks will be more intense than ever, once the summons are back under messenger control are back under control. And if I can sense the messengers that are coming, I know you can."

"I don't know if I can handle them," Jason admitted. "I never did get the butterfly thing working."

"There is one thing you could try," Rufus said.

"What's that?" Jason asked.

"Stop spending the whole battle trying to get one power from one of your familiars to do all the work for you and do it yourself."

"You make me sound like a slacker."

"Fighting smarter rather than harder is a good thing, Jason, but don't let yourself become obsessed with any specific tactic. You lose the big picture and start overlooking good opportunities. Stop messing about with something that doesn't work and remember how you used to do things before your extradimensional friend started shooting butterflies at people."

"You two are extremely strange," Elseth told them.

"No, I'm normal," Rufus said.

"If you were normal, Rufus, you would have pants that tight enchanted so they're flexible in a fight. Which you're about to have, by the way. There's a lot of stuff coming, and not just from our battlefield. Gold rank messengers and adventurers are bearing down on us, and the diamond-rank messenger just vanished."

Just as he said it, a messenger corpse appeared at their feet, still radiating diamond-rank power. Rufus and Elseth immediately staggered back, the aura forceful even in death. Jason raised his eyebrows, then grinned.

“Well, that’s the biggest freebie I’ve gotten since the World-Phoenix token.”

“What do you think happened?” Rufus asked.

“I think we just got Deus-ex-machinised, but I’m going to take the win and leave the how and why to later.”

He held a hand out over the corpse and chanted a spell.

“As your life was mine to reap, so your death is mine to harvest.”

Rufus watched transcended energy flow out of the body and into Jason as the corpse dissolved into rainbow smoke. The dark image of a bird, speckled with starlight, appeared above Jason, growing stronger as he drained more of the corpse’s astounding remnant life force.

“I don’t think his life was actually yours to reap, Jason.”

“It’s a spell, Rufus. I just have to say it; it doesn’t have to be true.”

“That’s an attitude you’ve thoroughly taken to heart, haven’t you?”

Chapter 692

Teaching Moment

Messengers and adventurers alike were rushing towards Jason. For the highest-ranked people, traversing the city was not a lengthy exercise, and the diamond-ranker adventurers pursuing Mah Go Schaat arrived first.

The diamond rankers were both elves, a man and a woman. Her name was Allayeth and his was Charist. What they found was Schaat's corpse, dissolving into rainbow smoke. A sharp-featured silver-ranker was extracting and devouring the remnant life-force. As he drained the diamond-ranker's power, a dark shape looming over him grew more and more distinct. It was quickly becoming void black, speckled with stars.

"Star phoenix," Allayeth whispered. She had heard of them but not seen one; they were creatures of the wider cosmos, not native to Pallimustus.

"What's going on here?" Charist demanded.

"I just got food delivery," the silver-ranker said. "You know how it is: You're fighting a battle, you get peckish but you don't have time to cook."

He gestured at the monster-filled sky above them.

"Because of the battle, obviously," he continued. "I have to say, I was hesitant about raw messenger, but it was totally worth going diamond-rank. There really is satisfaction to be found in top-quality product."

"You're making jokes?" Charist asked incredulously.

"You get used to it," another silver-ranker called out. "Sorry about him."

This was a dark-skinned and extremely handsome human. He and a third silver-ranker had backed off from the intensity of the dead diamond-ranker's aura. The man devouring the life energy from the corpse seemed unaffected. A glimpse at his aura revealed that it was the same one that had been projected over the city, sending the messengers and their summoned monsters into a frenzy.

The first man turned around to shout back at him while still draining the immense life force of the messenger.

"Don't apologise for me!"

"Then don't be rude," the handsome man called back. "These are busy people with a lot going on right now. They were probably chasing whoever that messenger you're eating was."

"I'm not eating him! Look, the life force is going in through my hand."

"If you want to avoid having to explain that you don't eat people so much, maybe don't make food delivery jokes."

"Okay, that is fair," the first man acknowledged.

The two diamond-rankers shared a confused look. They were used to the silent adoration of silver-rankers, who were honoured simply to be in their presence. It was the reaction they were getting from the third silver-ranker, an elf. She looked equal parts in awe of them and horrified at the other two. The diamond rankers turned to her.

"What is your name, adventurer?" Allayeth asked her.

"Elseth Culie, Lady Allayeth."

"A local girl," Charist said. "Your father is known to me. Convey my regards."

"It will be his honour and mine, Lord Charist," Elseth said, bobbing her head nervously.

"What is happening here?" Allayeth asked.

"This man is called Miller, although I don't think that is his true name. He and his familiar worked a ritual using some manner of magic I have never seen before. Then the messenger arrived, dead, moments before you. Miller proceeded to drain its life force."

"I do appreciate you turning up," Miller said cheerfully. He was still draining silver-gold life force, the messenger's reserves seeming limitless, even in death.

"Should we stop him?" Charist asked his companion.

"No," Allayeth responded. "It is unlikely that a silver-ranker can keep the messenger dead," Charist said, "but it will likely be some time before the messenger reconstitutes if his life force is drained entirely."

"Will the silver-ranker be able to hold all of that power?"

"He shouldn't be able to contain what he's taken already, yet he seems unperturbed. I imagine one of his essence abilities allows his life force reserves to expand when he drains excess."

"Yep," the man going by Miller announced. "I guess I'm no mystery at all to you lot."

They looked at him draining the power of a diamond-ranker whose seemingly instantaneous death at his feet remained wholly unexplained. He was wearing a cloak that matched the starry void of the star phoenix image forming above his head.

"If the messenger is dead," Charist said, "then we are free to go after their gold-rankers."

"A lot of their gold-rankers are coming here," Allayeth pointed out. "Our presence is the only reason they haven't arrived already."

“So, what’s it going to be?” Miller asked them. “Are you going to use me as bait and clean up the gold-rankers that come after me? I’ve been bait before, it’s cool. You should probably run around, intervening where the fight’s not going so well for our side, though. If you do, I’d appreciate you leaving us some gold-rankers to fend off theirs.”

Allayeth looked thoughtfully at Miller but spoke to Charist.

“He’s got a point. I was inclined to, as he said, use him as bait, but killing gold-rankers isn’t why we’re here. The priority is defending the city.”

“Very well. Miller, or whatever your name is. You’ll have some questions to answer when this is done. I will redirect enough gold-rankers here to achieve parity with the incoming messenger forces, but no more than that. It is a large city and this is far from the only battleground.”

“Tell me about it. I’ve got a pyramid with a bunch of gold-rank messengers in one room and a bunch of civilians in another. I’m a quirky neighbour and thirty minutes of wacky hijinks short of a hit family sitcom. Oh, I think this bloke is finally running low.”

The diamond rankers watched as the last of Mah Go Schaat’s corpse dissolved into rainbow smoke. Miller finished draining the energy, the image above him now seeming completely solid. It shrank down, sinking into Miller’s body.

Jason had drained a lot of life force over the last few years, including from messengers. None of it prepared him for what came out of the diamond-ranker.

“Are you alright?” Rufus asked. He was able to move closer now that the remnants of the messenger and the two diamond-rank adventurers were gone. Some of the messenger’s aura remained, an echo of his formidable power, but it was fading fast.

“I’m good,” Jason said, his expression wide-eyed manic.

“It’s just that you look a little intense. Like you’re on something that maybe you shouldn’t be.”

“Yeah, that checks out,” Jason told him. “That guy’s life force was like mainlining distilled lightning. In a good way.”

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- You have drained life force using [Blood Harvest].
 - Health, mana and stamina have been replenished.

 - You have exceeded maximum levels of life force, stamina and mana.
 - Ability [Sin Eater] has temporarily increased your maximum levels for life force, stamina and mana. These maximums will decline over time.

 - You have gained multiple instances of [Blood Frenzy].

- Maximum instances of [Blood Frenzy] have been reached. Additional instances will be converted into [Blood of the Immortal].
 - You have gained multiple instances of [Blood of the Immortal] from [Blood Harvest].
 - You have absorbed physical matter with inherent spiritual properties.
 - You have accumulated sufficient spiritually active matter to enter a star phoenix state.
 - Current star phoenix state availability: 1.
 - Next star phoenix state readiness: 14.8%
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“What was that bird thing?” Rufus asked.

“A visual representation of my ability to self-revive,” Jason said. “I’ve got another resurrection in the chamber, now. I’m just hoping I don’t get crushed to death by a chunk of falling building and have to use it right away.”

Jason and Rufus looked at each other, then both turned their gazes slowly upwards.

“It’s fine,” Rufus said with relief. “Still just a bunch of monsters. But there’s something going on up there. It’s hard to tell through all the monster auras.”

“It’s gold-rankers,” Jason said. “They’re all clashing in the sky already. The team is dropping down through that, so I hope they’re okay.”

“It’s getting rough out there,” Humphrey said. “Lindy, time to pull out one of your tricks.”

“I’ll try and clear up a path, sure,” Belinda said. “Get over to the edge.”

Humphrey moved to the open side of Onslow’s shell and Belinda conjured a massive, heavy plate into his hands. It was as large as Onslow’s shell itself and Humphrey had to brace his feet so the weight didn’t tip him out. Belinda used her Pit of the Reaper ability on it and Humphrey tossed it down with all his considerable strength. If he hadn’t, it wouldn’t have been able to outpace the plunging shell.

The plate dropped vertically, its surface containing an aperture to a dark dimensional pit. Tentacles darted in and out, snatching anything they could reach and yanking it into the void. Monsters, messengers and adventurers alike sensed it coming and moved out of the way, clearing Onslow's shell for an unmolested descent.

This went well until they were closing in on the ground and a messenger directed monsters to swarm the shell, clamping onto it. They ignored the wind barrier that scraped at them as if they were pushing themselves into a wheat thresher. Onslow was forced to a halt and even more monsters piled on. That was when Neil used his Reaper’s Redoubt

power. The team were all drawn into a safe dimensional space as death energy flooded a massive area centred on their original position.

Onslow's shell and its occupants reappeared in a cleared airspace, the survivors of Neil's ability having fled. Many didn't make it, having already been afflicted with Sin from Jason's aura, making them vulnerable to necrotic damage. The shell descended once more, finding the battle on the ground as frenetic as the one in the air, if not more so.

The monsters that were still on task continued to dig into the earth of an entertainment district that had become unrecognisable. It was now little more than rubble and excavated pits, monsters digging as adventurers fought not just them but also the messengers.

Most of the silver-rank messengers that had arrived were operating at or near ground level, fighting with savage abandon. After spending much of the battle holding back, they were mad with zeal as they sought out Jason and fought anyone who impeded their search.

Jason was teleporting across the battlefield so as to spread out the messengers pursuing him. He led them around the ruins of the entertainment district and into the path of scattered adventurers. The gold-rankers of both sides remained in the air, countering each other as they had for much of the battle. This left the main battle to the silver-rankers, but the golds could not be ignored. Every so often, a gold from one side or another would fire off a powerful attack or even break loose, attacking some silvers before returning to the fight above.

Jason wasn't just fleeing as he shadow-jumped back and forth. He frequently doubled back on messengers that he'd already led into adventurers. Between their distraction and his surprise attacks, he was able to swiftly leave a slate of afflictions before most had time to react. Enhanced by Blood Frenzy, Jason's speed outstripped most silver-rankers.

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- **[Blood Frenzy] (boon, unholy, stacking): Bonus to [Speed] and [Recovery]. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, up to a maximum threshold.**
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Even with his enhanced speed, Jason was still taking hits. This was partly because he went rampant, ignoring wounds and incoming attacks in pursuit of getting as many afflictions laid on as possible. The gold rankers were not entirely out of the fight either, with one firing a long-range assassination power that caused Jason's head to explode. He was staggered but didn't stop, still swinging his sword through the brief moment it took his head to grow back. The life force flooding his body made him, for the immediacy, all but

unkillable. Not only was he flush with life force from draining Mag Go Schaat but he also was gaining more as he went.

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- [Blood of the Immortal] (boon, healing, unholy, stacking): On suffering damage, an instance is consumed to grant a powerful but short-lived heal-over-time effect. Additional instances can be accumulated but do not have a cumulative effect.
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While he did manage to swing his sword without his head, the precision was significantly lacking. More frustrating for Jason was waiting for his mouth to grow back and he yelled out a battle cry the moment it was restored.

"Tis but a scratch!"

"Maybe draw less attention to yourself," Rufus suggested through voice chat.

"No idea what you're talking about," Jason responded innocently.

"Someone just blew up your head!"

"No, they didn't."

"I just watched it happen."

"It was just a flesh wound."

"Yes. The flesh of your entire head."

"I've had worse."

The messengers pursued Jason around the battlefield as monsters continued their directive to dig their way down. Adventurers like Elseth Culie were working to stop them, but the messenger presence made crucial demands on their time. More often than they would like, they were forced to face messengers instead of clearing the monsters from their assault on the underground bunker.

Slowly but surely, the messengers were boxing Jason in. Had their minds not been clouded with zeal, they might have wondered how they were managing to herd someone who could teleport that freely. When Jason decided enough of them were in range, he used his Feast of Absolution power.

From across the battlefield, the life force of the messengers lit up, as Jason revoked all the afflictions that had built up on them. Even the ones he never faced had gained afflictions for each attack they made against an adventurer. Poison, disease and unholy power were drained from all of them, bruise-coloured lights of sickly green, bruise purple and ugly yellow. The afflictions flowed through the air on streams of silver-gold, matching the life force of the messengers. From above, Jason looked like an eldritch spider, draining his victims through his arcane webs.

In the place of the removed afflictions, inside Jason's enemies, he left the blue, silver and gold glow of transcendent power. It ate them from the inside, irresistible and all but unstoppable.

Jason was not the only adventurer making a good showing for himself. Rufus was on a rampage, finally triggering his zone magic that turned the sky over the battlefield dark, lighting it up with a false moon. Containing all the power Rufus had been building up since the start of the battle, it fired beams of immense power, crippling or outright killing messengers. He only managed a few shots before the power was gone, but his display roused the adventurer morale. Seeing a solid win heartened the adventurers to push back against the zealot messengers.

Seeing their forces being overpowered, the gold-rank messengers issued a directive. The raging zealots weren't doing a lot of listening, but this was an order that suited their current state just fine. From the start of the battle, the adventurers had been wary of the isolating duel powers the messengers possessed. All of a sudden, all of the messengers that had them, which was most, used them all at once.

Just before they did, a gold-rank messenger had taken note of Onslow's shell. Half of Jason's team was using it as a bunker, even inviting a few glass-cannon adventurers to join them. The messenger broke free of his opponent and dropped on the shell like a hammer. It broke apart, sending adventurers scattering just as the silver-rank messengers were launching their duel powers.

Only those standing alone could be targeted, or the isolation powers failed. Humphrey and Jason were both hit, while Sophie dodged and found Belinda, causing the messenger targeting her to waste his power. Neil was grabbed by Stash, in the form of a hopping insect that pulled him out of a messenger's path.

Clive landed hard after Onslow's shell shattered. His arms wrapped around Onslow's humanoid form, whimpering from having his shell smashed apart. A messenger found him like that and activated his challenge power, drawing them into a dimensional space. It was clearly an artificial area, consisting of a flat white circle, floating in a void.

Clive looked up, dazed, just as a spear came down and skewered Onslow through the head.

"Face me, human."

Clive pushed himself to his feet with his staff, his wand having been lost somewhere in the breaking of Onslow's shell. He looked down at his dead familiar, the vulnerable humanoid form having not resisted the messenger's spear.

“No familiar,” the messenger sneered. “One look and I can see that you are a weak spell caster. You will never leave this place.”

Clive looked up at the messenger, blank-faced, then again down at Onslow.

“Sentimental,” the messenger mocked, then lunged with his spear. Clive’s staff shifted, the spear slid along it, the messenger slightly off-balance. The end of the staff slipped between the messenger’s legs and Clive gave it a little leverage that turned the hovering charge into an ugly tumble.

Clive didn’t follow up as the messenger floated to his feet, more hurt by the indignity than landing on the ground. Clive looked at him, blank-faced, took out a recording crystal and tossed it into the air.

“I need to record this,” he told the messenger, his voice flat and emotionless. “It’s going to be a teaching moment.”

Chapter 693

Rigid Flaws

Clive was trapped in a dimensional space by the duelling power of a messenger. Until one of them was dead, neither was able to leave. The space was an empty void, the only object being a massive flat disc on which Clive was standing. The remains of his precious familiar, Onslow, lay at his feet.

Facing off against Clive was a spear-wielding messenger whose sneer had turned into a glare. He had lunged at Clive, only to discover the adventurer could use his staff for more than blasting force bolts.

Item: [Spell Lance of the Magister] (silver rank [growth], legendary)

The staff of an ancient sorcerer, this weapon is focused on priming enemies for a potent magical assault (weapon, staff).

- Requirements: The power to wield magical tools.
- Basic attack: Explosive disruptive-force bolt. Inflicts [Spell Impetus].
- Basic attack: Disruptive-force beam. Consumes mana. Sustaining the beam on a target periodically inflicts [Spell Impetus].
- Effect: Increase the mana consumption when casting a spell to increase the effect. Effect is further enhanced if wielding both [Spell Lance of the Magister] and [Magister's Tithe].
- Effect: Can be used as a focus for the unique ritual [Magister's Ballista]. This ritual is not possible without the staff.
- Effect: When used to strike an enemy in melee gain an instance of [Power of the War Magus].
- [Spell Impetus] (affliction, magic, stacking): All resistances are reduced. When the recipient suffers an offensive spell from someone wielding [Spell Lance of the Magister], all instances of [Spell impetus] are consumed to increase the effect of the spell.
- [Power of the War Magus] (magic, stacking): Gain a body-hugging barrier that resists damage. When a force bolt is fired from the staff, all instances are consumed to increase damage.

Clive didn't have the matching wand, Magister's Tithe, which had fallen from his grip when the gold-rank messenger smashed apart Onslow's shell. The silver-rank messenger

he now faced had trapped Clive before he could retrieve it. The messenger continued to glare at him, hefting his spear. A system window appeared, flickering on the verge of collapse.

-
- Party leader [Jason Asano] has had all abilities negated.
 - Party has been disbanded.
 - Ability [Party Interface] has ended.
-

The window blinked out of existence.

Humphrey stood with each foot pinning a wing as he drove the point of his sword down on the messenger's throat. The point of his stylised dragon wing sword was essentially blunt, so he had to ram it down over and over, committing decapitation by blunt object.

For most of the time Jason spent on Earth, Clive had adventured as a trio with Sophie and Humphrey. His powers were not suited to frontline combat, but without a full team to shield him, coming face-to-face with danger was inevitable. Clive's preferred solution was to pre-empt such situations with comprehensive planning, but even he acknowledged that it was impossible to be ready for everything.

Even if he had been willing to ignore this truth, Sophie and Humphrey were not. They drilled him on fighting up close and personal, where he was least comfortable. He would never choose to take the fight into melee, but he could hold his own far better than the messenger he faced had expected.

They moved around each other in a dance, the messenger's spear alternately jabbing, lunging and spinning. Clive moved through the patterns Sophie and Humphrey had drilled into him, the tips of his staff leaving trails of gold light behind them. They lingered in the air as the pair clashed, and soon the air was littered with golden streaks.

Clive's powers were far from ideal for this kind of fight, but he had a number that were strikingly effective. His Mana Shield power allowed him, as the name implied, to soak damage by draining mana from his fortunately enormous pool. It was a costly draw when under repeated attack, but the silver-rank effect at least included a mana drain field that leeched it from his enemies. With only one foe on hand, however, its efficiency was not the best in a duel.

His main source of replenishment was the silver-rank effect of the Blood Magic ability. The base effect was to trade health for mana, which was the opposite of his current

requirements. As of his last rank-up, though, he could turn other people's health into mana with a ranged drain attack. Every time his opponent was fool enough to give him some distance, Clive drained his mana in a bright blue stream.

The messenger quickly learned not to let Clive have any distance. Along with mana drains, Clive used each reprieve from melee to bolster himself with more spells. A few abilities from the balance and karma essences left Clive almost more trouble than he was worth to attack.

Rune Mantle inflicted random retaliatory effects, from explosive knock-back damage to strength-energating afflictions. Mantle of Retribution was more simple and direct, applying retribution damage in response to every attack. It wasn't only defensive powers, either, as any chance to cast was an opportunity for the Instant Karma spell. This was an attack spell that dealt damage to the target based on how much damage they recently inflicted themselves.

In the early stages of the fight, attacking Clive seemed pointless as he soaked all the damage and dealt more back. Even the special attacks that punched through Clive's Mana Shield were returned twice over, each one more powerfully than the original.

Ability: [Vengeance Mirror] (Karma)

- Special attack.
- Cost: Varies.
- Cooldown: Varies.

- Current rank: Silver 4 (01%).

- Effect (iron): Replicate the last spell or special attack used on you or an ally by an enemy within the last few moments. Cost and cooldown are the same as the replicated attack. You may still use this ability if the triggering effect was negated. The replicated ability functions at your rank, not the rank of the enemy that originally used it.

- Effect (bronze): You may use the replicated ability a second time.

- Effect (silver): The ability replicated has enhanced effects if used against the individual it was copied from.

Clive's close quarter's techniques were not built for extended use, however. They were designed to get him out of danger or to hold on until help arrived, neither of which was going to happen here. The messenger simply took Clive's hits and bulled through the retaliatory effects.

The messenger's powers leaned towards decent resilience and rapid healing, allowing him to eat the punishment and keep going. Clive, on the other hand, was heavily reliant on his mana pool. While it was far larger than a normal adventurer, it could hold up only so long when his Mana Shield was under constant barrage.

The main factor swinging the fight away from Clive's favour, however, was that the messenger was starting to read Clive's patterns. Clive may have been heavily drilled by Sophie and Humphrey, but even highly effective patterns were no match for experience, and many of Clive's patterns were ineffective, inefficient and seemed to make little sense.

The messenger was battered but healing fast, while Clive was increasingly just battered. More and more attacks were punching through his barrier as his mana ebbed, making his shield weaker. The messenger recognized that his enemy could no longer afford to copy his attacks and returned to throwing out powerful special attacks, his spear glowing and vibrating with power. Sensing his impending victory, the messenger started to gloat.

"You fight well for a spellcaster, human, but your skills are shallow. You cannot hide behind your magic shell forever."

Clive remained silent, just as he had since tossing out the recording crystal. If the messenger wanted to gloat, that was fine. All the more pride to strip away, and better than wonder why Clive's fighting technique had so many fixed patterns and rigid flaws. The two continued to dance through air now thick with the golden lines still being left behind by Clive's staff.

The messenger had realised the floating, glowing lines were harmless and that Clive was trying to use them to bait him onto Rune Traps. The messenger was too attentive, however, and ignored the golden lights as he watched carefully for the traps. He even remembered where the traps were after they vanished, not triggering any of them.

Sensing that the spellcaster's exhaustion was bringing the battle to its climax, the messenger moved to finish it in one glorious strike. A powerful beat of his wings threw him high into the air. The spellcaster took the chance to shoot a force blast from his impressive staff, boosted by consuming the charges it had built up from every melee strike landed throughout the duel. The messenger quickly folded his wings in front of him, absorbing much of the damage but the heavy impact still sent him tumbling back, feathers scattering from pummeled wings.

It was not enough. All it accomplished was making the messenger even more determined to finish the spellcaster with his ultimate attack. He glared down at the man,

who had moved into the centre of the glowing lines that marked the progress of the battle. Glowing lines, the messenger realised, that looked very different when viewed from above.

At ground level, the lines were nothing but random shapes, left behind by Clive's staff as it moved. From above, viewed as a flat plane instead of in three dimensions, it looked suspiciously like a ritual circle. Suddenly he remembered all the moments of strange, impractical movement the spellcaster had gone through in the battle. He had put it down to inexperience and adhering too closely to fixed forms, and he suspected that truly was the case. But somehow, the spellcaster had managed to do something else as well.

He would have needed to remember every required nuance, adding to the ritual diagram opportunistically as the fight allowed. The kind of mind that could keep all that together was staggering, and the messenger hoped that the spellcaster had made a mistake in the process. He almost certainly had, as getting it right would be near impossible, yet the messenger was certain, deep in his gut, that there weren't any mistakes.

The messenger met the man's eyes. The spellcaster's expression had been blank throughout the battle, but now it was not. The messenger's blood turned cold on seeing the gleeful malevolence on the spellcaster's face as he held up his staff and chanted a ritual trigger.

"Let loose wrath's ascension: Magister's Ballista."

The messenger initiated his ultimate attack power. It didn't, strictly speaking, have a name, but he thought of it as Descent of the King. He did not tell anyone about the name. The power launched him towards the ground, but surprise had cost him. The spellcaster began his short chant as the messenger was startled by the revelation of the ritual, hesitation costing him in the critical moment. His plunging attack was gathering what he thought of as unstoppable momentum when a force spear shot up and stopped it.

The spear had shot from the end of the spellcaster's staff, and it did not just stop the messenger but sent him tumbling up in the other direction. The momentum of his attack was easily overwhelmed, and the spear was far from done. It turned around and then shot into the messenger again. Over and over it landed, never giving the messenger a chance to recover as it grew weaker and weaker. He was bloodied and beaten by attack after attack, juggled helplessly in the air. The spear impaled a wing on one pass and half-blinded him on another. He was too disoriented to see the man on the ground directing the spear, waving his arm like a conductor.

Clive didn't stop the spear from juggling the messenger until the magic of the ritual was expended, even though he was sure the messenger was long dead. What he did do was have the recording crystal zoom in as the messenger went from glorious warrior to avian road kill. Clive felt the dimensional space dissolving around him and he released the magic of Onslow's vessel. Normally that would return the familiar to a tattoo state on Clive's chest, but the dead vessel was empty now. Onslow's spirit would not return until Clive summoned a fresh vessel, the old one dissolving into rainbow smoke. Clive didn't even remove himself from the stench of it.

"I'll bring you back to me, little buddy," he whispered.

Many other adventurers had been caught up in the wave of messenger isolation attacks, some coming out on top and some coming out dead. Humphrey had escaped fairly quickly, having taken his messenger apart. He and the rest of the team continued to fight messengers and monsters as they waited for Jason and Clive to escape.

Jason's isolation was a type that others could see but not interfere with, those making the attempt finding themselves damaged and tossed away by a barrier surrounding each combatant. They could see Jason and his opponent, however, and were not especially worried. The mix of indignation and frustration on his opponent's face told them that Jason was doing what Jason did.

The one they worried about was Clive. Not only was he one of their weaker individual combatants but they couldn't see what was happening. He had vanished into a dimensional space and they dreaded seeing a messenger reappear with his corpse. Instead, Belinda was startled as Clive reappeared right in front of her, battered but alive. Also, alone.

"What happened to the messenger?" she asked.

Clive shoved her backwards and a wet mass of flesh and feathers fell from above, spraying silver-gold blood when it crashed between them with a juicy splat.

Chapter 694

Doubt, Fear and Hesitation

A messenger slammed into Jason and they both went tumbling to the ground. Similar attacks had struck Humphrey, Clive and other adventurers around the battlefield. Jason rolled away from one another and felt some manner of power settle over him. His magical buffs vanished. His conjured items, cloak and robe, crumbled into dust. His aura was fully restricted, but not exactly suppressed. It felt more like there was an invisible cloud surrounding his entire body, preventing him from projecting any aura through it. That cloud felt familiar, like the boundary of a soul, meaning it was most likely impregnable.

A system window appeared, flickering like a TV with a bad signal.

-
- All magical effects have been negated. This does not trigger any secondary effects.
 - All conjured items have been eliminated. This does not trigger any secondary effects.
 - All magical items have had their abilities suppressed. This does not trigger any secondary effects.
 - None of your familiars can manifest. All existing familiars have been unmanifested and passive familiar abilities have been disabled.
 - All magical abilities have been suppressed. This does not trigger any secondary effects.
-

Jason barely had time to read it before the window sputtered and blinked out entirely. He pushed himself to his feet, watching the messenger do the same. That was something he'd never seen before as messengers always floated to their feet using their auras. Yet, here was one who pushed herself up with her hands and stood with her feet on the ground instead of floating over it.

Jason noted that her appearance also diverged from the standard for many messengers. They frequently favoured diaphanous materials with little practical or protective value, more concerned with their image as beings of power and glory. This messenger looked more like an adventurer, with practical leather armour and a pair of long-handled axes. Her elbow-length leather gauntlets had reinforced knuckles and serrated blades running up the outside of her forearms. This matched the blades of her axes, the edges also serrated. They very much looked like the intention was to maximise not damage but fear and pain, making shallow tears in flesh rather than deep cuts.

Her gear was incongruous with her facial features. She was beautiful, as all messengers were, but it was not the sharp beauty of a sword. Her face was cute, sweet and soft, her dark hair cropped into a short and practical pixie cut. Standing at more than

seven feet tall did oddly little to change the impression. She looked, to Jason's eyes, maybe sixteen or seventeen, although he knew she was likely much older.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"By the reckoning of this world, it is my eighteenth year. I will be young to have such glory as will come to me today."

Jason sighed.

"This one's going to feel bad," he muttered to himself.

At that moment, Sophie and Rufus attacked her from each side in a pincer strike. Both were blocked by an energy barrier that froze them in place for a moment before hurling them both away. The messenger looked at them with a scoffing laugh before turning back to Jason.

"I am Tera Jun Casta," she announced proudly, "and it is your ill fortune to meet me. I was not the one chosen to test you, Jason Asano, but I will be the one to kill you. It is I that will wipe clean the stain of your heresy and reap the glory that comes of claiming your head."

"Okay," Jason said with the resignation of an office worker being handed a fresh stack of paperwork. "Good luck with that."

He was now garbed in boxer shorts, boots and a potion belt with his scabbard hanging from it. His sword dangled loosely in his hand and the necklace with his magical amulet and shrunken cloud flask hung from his neck.

"You may be arrogant now, Asano, but—"

"If I'm being entirely honest," he interrupted her, "I was pretty arrogant before now, as well. My surname is Asano and my personal name is Jason, and I have a slight flaw in my character."

"You will not be so glib once you realise the situation you are in!" she declared in a hurried half-yell, as if to preclude his butting-in again.

"You clearly don't realise who you're dealing with," he told her "Glib is kind of my thing. And I understand the situation perfectly well."

"Is that so? You are in for a rude surprise, Asano."

"I love surprises. And rudeness, for that matter. What have you got for me?"

She scowled.

"You are no doubt confused as to what has happened to your powers."

"Nope. You used an ability that encapsulated us both in your soul, meaning that we're impervious to outside harm unless they bury us alive or something. I imagine that both our power sets are fully suppressed and that we'll stay sealed away until one of us is dead.

Maybe there's a secondary release mechanism where, after a certain time, either we both get released or both get killed."

The messenger's eyes went wide.

"How can you possibly know that?"

"It's called context clues. I think you need to get out and see the cosmos a bit. Does inter-dimensional conquest have a gap-year program? Have you ever heard of Rumspringa?"

"I don't understand your foolish prattle. Speak plainly."

"You messengers travel between universes, right?"

"That is within our power."

"You should find a quiet one and try a little self-discovery. Have you read *Eat, Pray, Love*? You could do a liberal arts degree. You need to expand your horizons is what I'm saying."

"I see what you are doing. Babbling to mask your fear."

"Actually, I'm stalling while I check if I can do anything about this barrier with my aura. No luck, sadly; your soul has us locked down tight."

"You will be free when I wrench your head from your body."

"Try and get the spine to come with it if you can. Hold it up and let it dangle for a moment. If I've got to go, there are worse ways than a classic fatality. I don't suppose you have ice powers by any chance?"

Elseth Culie, the elven affliction specialist, was doing her best to slow down the fresh wave of monsters digging at the bunker underneath the ruined entertainment district. With the messengers having given up their safe but conservative strategy, they were suffering more losses but their summoned minions were freer to complete their task.

Rufus and Sophie had taken on the role of shielding Elseth as she worked, her previous guardians scattered or occupied fighting messengers. In between spells, Elseth looked over at where John Miller and a messenger were shrouded in a power that had deflected both Sophie and Rufus' attempts to intervene.

"Most of the messengers and adventurers started fighting right away," Elseth pointed out. "What do you think they're talking about? And why is he in his underpants?"

"The answer to almost any question you have about Jason," Rufus told her, "is that it's better if you don't know."

"He's probably telling her that something is kind of his thing," Sophie added, eyes scanning the sky above them for threats.

“What is his thing?” Elseth asked.

“Melodrama,” Rufus said. “And I hear the messengers are just as bad. Their fight may come down to who can best capture a sense of mournful longing as they stare off into the middle distance.”

“Yeah, like you’ve never done any brooding,” Sophie told him.

Tera Jun Casta tired of Jason’s words and lunged to the attack. He immediately recognised that she seemed comfortable fighting with her abilities suppressed, which was hardly a surprise given the nature of her duelling power. Her style was practised but orthodox, for the most part. She didn’t try anything elaborate, simply trying to make her serrated axes meet flesh as efficiently as possible.

The wild card was her wings, which she used to supplement her clean, efficient axe work. Her feathers were a dark red-brown, like her hair, with a tough, leathery texture. The wings held up well to slashes from Jason’s sword as she made liberal use of them. Whether as a weapon to batter him, an obstacle to lead him or a shield to block him, she made good use of them.

While she used the wings effectively, it was not a tactic that Jason found overwhelming. He had fought bizarre creatures by the thousands in six years of adventuring, and it had been a long time since he considered a humanoid, even a tall one with wings, as exotic.

Without his powers, Jason was forced to become more aggressive. This was where sparring with Sophie, Rufus and Humphrey paid off, as they were all aggressive in different ways. His model for this was Sophie, as while their styles had diverged over time, they retained the same root in the Way of the Reaper.

Rufus had always been ruthless about Jason training for the worst-case scenarios, but he always had trouble getting Jason to be more straightforward. Jason always got caught up in tricky strategies and roundabout tactics, which he infused into every combat scenario.

Jason had full access to the Way of the Reaper’s techniques, courtesy of the largest skill books he had ever seen. The reality was, however, that there were only so many that Jason had mastered. While he had made the ones he used the most his own, the majority he could use, but with a rote-learning comprehension that anyone truly skilled would look down on.

Jason switched up his style frequently to keep the messenger on edge, not knowing how he would face her next. One moment he was fighting at the limits of her reach and the

next dashing in past the long hafts of her axes. A backflip kick to the chin led into a more acrobatic style, leading her on a merry dance through the levelled buildings of the entertainment district.

At first, it worked. The impetuosity of youth quickly had her frustrated and making mistakes, although Jason failed to capitalise. The weakness of his over-elaborate approach meant that he wasn't landing the kind of heavy, repeated hits required to take down a silver-ranker. They were extremely tough and healed fast, making a victory without powers to amplify damage hard to achieve.

Jason's failure to do significant damage turned the balance of the fight against him. While Tera was young, she had been fighting her entire life, giving her triple Jason's combat experience, at least in years. Once her mind settled, she realised his flaws and that she did not share them. Her vicious weapons and straightforward style were built around winning this kind of fight.

Jason realised that he needed to stop getting caught up in flights of fancy about how to fight. Time and again, Rufus had told him that there were times when all the tricks in the world didn't matter. Sometimes it was about the willingness to be brutal and the resolve to endure brutality. Some fights couldn't be danced around or subverted. Sometimes you had to stand up, take the hits and hit back harder.

When he finally accepted this, the tenor of the fight changed. Jason faced off against Tera inside what he guessed had once been a tavern. It seemed like it had been an open space but too little remained to tell. What was left of the walls wasn't even as tall as he was, barring a chimney that threatened to crumble at any moment. Outside, what had once been a street was now a pit dug by monsters trying to drill into the bunker below.

Jason and Tera started wailing on each other with their weapons. Tera's serrated axes and gauntlet blades were brutal and flesh-tearing, while Jason's was refined and elegant. The sword had its powers suppressed, leaving the runes running down the black blade in their basic white. Even so, it remained a masterful weapon of near-limitless potential, forged by Gary with the assistance of his diamond-rank mentor. It was a sword whose construction was guided by the power of Jason's soul flowing through it, making for the ideal melding of wielder and weapon.

The duel had become simple and savage, painting both combatants in their own and each other's blood. Tera's twin axes were suited to this kind of fight and had torn ragged gashes in Jason's flesh. In their brutal stand-up fight, she had taken the early advantage because of her weapons, but she felt that start to shift. Her axes had taken a beating from Jason's sword, with heavy nicks and even losing some of the edge serrations.

As the fight was a marathon, rather than a sprint, she was forced to be less aggressive with her weapons. Jason's sword, on the other hand, was marred only by blood. Whether clashing blade to blade, slicing through her tough armour or missing and striking a wall, nothing left so much as a scratch on the blade. This allowed Jason to continue being as aggressive as he liked.

Even though she had to be mindful of her weapons, Tera continued the exchange of relentless attacks. She and Jason both grew more savage, striving to inflict damage faster than natural silver-rank healing could undo it. Like lumberjacks hand-sawing a tree, they fell into a rhythm of attack and counter-attack until they were both torn and ragged.

Tera's armour was all but ribbons, the skin beneath it not much better. Jason was, if anything, worse for not having armour in the first place. The love hearts on his boxer shorts were now invisible, the white cloth soaked entirely red.

An unspoken agreement formed between the pair: The one with the will to keep standing and take it the longest would be the one to survive. This was only a realisation for Jason, as Tera had known things would always come to this. Jason could see the manic glee in his opponent's expression as the duel reached this stage. It was her power that had put them here, after all, and this was the kind of fighting she knew.

For her part, Tera was surprised that Jason had lasted this long. His foolish early strategy was something she had seen before, and each time her enemy had crumbled on realising it would utterly fail. Every trickster she had fought lacked the resolve for this kind of fight. But not only did he engage fully in the ugly slugfest, but he was grinning like a snake after an egg rolled into its lair.

Tera was starting to feel an uncharacteristic sensation she realised, after a moment, was worry. It was only a tiny amount; this was her kind of fight and it was playing out just the way it should. Asano's tricky fighting had been annoying, but he finally realised that without a way to finish the job, all his fancy dancing meant nothing. The only way to win was to stand there and take more punishment than the enemy.

Tera loved her isolation power. It stripped away all the tricks and all the magic, leaving combat in its purest form. Victory wasn't about weapons or skill unless one person massively outclassed the other. It was about resolve. The ability to take the hits unflinchingly, not letting it affect hitting the enemy back.

This was why Tera chose not the weapons that inflicted the most harm but those that instilled the most fear. In every duel Tera had initiated with her power, the fight had come down to crudely hammering each other until her enemy lost their nerve. As the damage built up, they realised that to keep fighting it would only get worse and worse. That was

when the fear crept in. Then there was the pain. The mind could block out pain, she had learned, but the ragged wounds left by her serrated axes were ugly. They *looked* painful, which helped force the idea of pain into the mind.

Once fear and pain crept in, the fight was all but over. They would hesitate, just a little, not even realising they were doing it at first. But it was enough to sap their strength just a little, make them shrink back, just a little, and that was when she dominated. Every moment made it worse until they finally collapsed, often literally. More than a few opponents had knelt and waited as she took their heads, spirits broken.

But it had been too long. None of the signs were there. Asano was looking more like a market-stall meat skewer now, but he was coming at her harder than ever. His eyes sparkled with inhuman light from a face caked in blood. There was no fear of death, no grimacing through the pain.

What she saw was a man for whom fear and death and pain meant nothing. She had fought them her entire life, but this was someone who had walked beside them until they were boon companions. Looking into his eyes, Tera realised that the summoned creatures her kind had brought with them were not monsters. *This* was a monster.

With that revelation, the doubt, fear and hesitation finally arrived. But to her horror, they came from her, not him, her mind and body betraying her. They saw what she had brought out in this man and knew that he would never stop. She was somehow certain, against all sense and reason, that even killing him wouldn't do it. She might as well have duelled the sky, for all her axes could cut it down.

Tera refused to let fear rule her. After using her power so many times, she had found an opponent that would not fall in the kind of fight she had engineered, so she had to change it. She had to gamble on a decisive move before her growing fear left her paralysed.

Behind her opponent, a deep pit lay where there had once been a road. Monsters had dug it as they strove to breach the underground bunker, and were probably down there, digging still. It would be a tight space where long weapons would be useless and her gauntlet spikes would be the weapon of choice. Dropping her axes, she launched herself into a crash tackle.

Her wings lacked the magic to fly but one heavy beat from them was enough to throw her forward like a battering ram. Jason's sword went tumbling from his hand as they barrelled over the edge of the pit to plummet down. When they reached to bottom they crashed hard into a summoned monster.

The monster was a cube with an arm emerging from each side and an eye in the palm of each hand. Beams from those eyes had been drilling through a metal plate it had dug up when Tera and Asano landed on it hard. To Tera's surprise, the impact and their combined weight finished the job, breaching the bunker and dropping them all inside.

Chapter 695

No

The bunker beneath the entertainment district was set up as a series of dormitories, punctuated by various service rooms. As the occupants were primarily not essence users, there was a need for food preparation and toilet facilities for thousands. Those facilities, in turn, required logistics and utility infrastructure to service them.

Jason, Tera Jun Casta and a confused summoned monster crashed through the ceiling and into a warehouse filled with massive crates and barrels. They hit a rack hard on their way down, sending several crates tumbling to the floor. The crates broke open and spewed out compressed rations, more than the crates should have been able to hold. Cheap but mediocre dimensional magic had been used to increase storage space, but that magic broke along with the crates, depositing the contents onto the floor.

Jason and Tera were both bloodied, having finally fought hard enough to overcome each other's inherent toughness and rapid healing. Jason's sword was back outside, having been dropped when Tera rammed them both into the pit. She had already dropped her axes and lost one of her gauntlets during their descent. The other had lost one of its serrated arm blades, but it was now the only weapon that either of them had.

Alarms were blaring at their intrusion and, as they got to their feet, a pair of silver-rank adventurers burst through the warehouse doors, a squad of bronze-rankers behind them. One of the silver-rankers dove at Tera and was hurled into the wall hard enough to leave cracks for his trouble. The other fired a stream of frigid wind, laden with icicles at Jason. Jason turned to look at the man as the beam stopped dead around arm's length away.

"I know I'm in rough condition," Jason understated, "but of the three intruders, one has wings and another is a monster. You can't figure out which one is the adventurer?"

Tera looked at Jason and then at the door, making her choice and bolting for it, past the adventurer picking himself up off the floor. The bronze-rankers split like bowling pins as she barrelled through.

"Deal with the monster, then seal and barricade the room," Jason commanded the silver ranker. "I'll handle her."

Jason had no aura to back up his words, yet the man who had just attacked him found himself moving to obey. There was something in Jason's voice that dared him to disobey, and he was not taking that dare. He was not an expert fighter, which was why

he'd been assigned to the bunker. He wouldn't be missed in the battle above, and if the bunker was breached, it was unlikely to matter how strong the on-station defenders were.

Jason swiftly pursued Tera, following a trail of silver-gold blood. He moved through a short series of utility corridors until he found her shoving open a pair of double doors. They looked heavy and were doubtless magically reinforced, but the people behind them had failed to close them in time. She shoved the unlatched doors wide, scattering the people on the other side before dashing inside.

Jason pursued her into a massive dormitory that held hundreds of people. Rows of bunks filled the far end while closer to the door, cafeteria-style tables were lined with people. Tera glanced back at Jason and he saw the fire in her eyes had dimmed. She was no longer willing to face him, even if she did have the only weapon.

He would have let her live if he could, but she had taken that option from him. He didn't know whether her power would release or slay them if it expired before one of them killed the other. He wouldn't trust her word on it, and he wasn't willing to wait when monsters would soon be pouring into the shelter through the hole.

He watched Tera look from him to the people who were scrambling to move away from them, climbing over tables and each other to head for the bunk end of the massive room. He realised that she wasn't seeing people fleeing for their lives; she was seeing hostages. They were her path to evening the odds, making up for her lost confidence.

She would be able to get to the closest people before he could get to her, and they both knew it. Even if he did reach her first, the fight would come with collateral damage, and quite likely a lot of it. When she moved in their direction, Jason knew that there was little point in chasing. All he could do was try and talk her down, but the idea of civilian casualties he was helpless to stop was clouding his mind. Images of people dying in Broken Hill and Makassar because he wasn't strong enough flashed through his mind.

"Don't. You." **DARE.**

He didn't even speak the last word, which vibrated through the air on a wave of aura. Tera stopped dead, jolted in shock. She stared at Jason, who was equally surprised. What he just did shouldn't have been possible, his power sealed by her duelling ability.

They stared at each other as Jason's mind raced through the possible explanations, rejecting all but one. His astral realm wasn't just a place he could go, a place that belonged to him. It was him; it was his soul. And just like a messenger, his soul was his body. One being's power might suppress his own, but it could not suppress his entire astral realm. That power was far too great, and now he knew there was a way to tap into it.

He examined the sensations shooting through him, but it was hard to pick out any unusual sensations through all the damage. He managed to pick out an odd tremulation, his body quivering ever so slightly in reaction to a power that had just surged through it. It was a similar sensation to overcharging his portal ability with energy from his astral gate.

“How?” Tera asked breathlessly.

For once, Jason did not respond with a pithy line. He was concentrating on how he could actively tap into that power, replicating what he had done unconsciously in a rage. He knew he couldn't call up a portal to his astral realm to draw power through. He had tried that while stalling for time with banter at the beginning of the fight. But he was his astral realm. Did he even need one? Could he *be* the portal? Not to travel through, but to tap into his full reserve of power.

He saw the shock fading from Tera's face and she was eyeing the civilians again. They had managed to flee further down the room while Jason and Tera stared at each other, but it wouldn't stop them from getting caught up in it if the fight continued. He didn't have time for careful experimentation, to see if he could do the thing that popped into his mind without harming himself. That was nothing new. Concentrating on the feeling he had when he'd spoken out in anger, he reached inside to draw out power in a way unlike any he had attempted before.

Tera's attention was arrested again as she felt Jason's aura brush against her, faint but unmistakable. She told herself it shouldn't be possible, and not for the first time in the last few moments. She felt it surge again, just like when it had flooded the city. Once again she felt the rage as the aura towered over her, diminishing everything she was and belittling her ambitions. Just as it had the first time, fury rose within her.

From the day she was brought into being and her training began, she had been told that she was the pinnacle of creation; a living embodiment of the will of the cosmos. That nothing, save for her own kind, was her equal. She was power and glory manifest.

She was shown the path that would lead her to stand at the top, even amongst the messengers. To become an astral king. The path was known, but it was rigid and hard. Only a messenger could walk it.

In eighteen years, not a single day went by where she doubted her path for a moment. She met every challenge and accomplished every feat presented to her. She would reach gold and then diamond, and then become the pinnacle of her kind that, in turn, was the pinnacle of all kinds.

Then came Asano. He was no messenger, yet everything that made her special, she could feel within him. The body-spirit gestalt. The aura that could seize physical reality, even stronger than her own. Most of all, he wasn't struggling to climb the tower to astral monarchy; he was inside it, walking up easy stairs at his leisure. He was incomplete, but unmistakably an astral king.

It was perversion. Heresy. The only path to astral king was a messenger transcending diamond-rank. It made a lie of everything she knew. Everything she had been told, every single day of her life. Most of all, it made her feel small. Lesser. How could she be the pinnacle of creation with this abomination roaming the cosmos, making a mockery of who and what she was? And it wasn't just an astral king, either. She didn't recognise exactly the other elements of his aura, but at the very least she felt the echo of divinity. Was he on a path that went beyond even astral king? If such a person could exist, a supremacy that she could never reach, then not only was she not superior, but she never could be. If so, then what meaning was there in her own experience?

The fear and doubt that had plagued her were gone. She did not need hostages or weapons. All she needed was Asano's ruined corpse beneath her feet, dissolving into rainbow smoke. His existence must come to an end. She was poised to launch herself at him when her entire universe became pain.

Jason had known from the start that this fight would be bad. He had, for all intents, been pushed into a death match with a teenager, born and raised in a cult. Like any cult, the doctrine seemed transparently foolish from the outside, the ideology crumbling at the first sign of critical thought. Their superiority obsession was clearly nonsensical, falling apart when contrasted with almost any information not sourced from their own insular community.

But to those born and raised in a cult, or who had found something in it that filled a deep need, the incongruities didn't matter. They had been primed from the beginning to ignore the lies of outsiders, however compelling they might seem. But when they were forced to confront those problems, they did not rationally accept what the outsiders saw as logical, self-evident conclusions. They got angry and they got violent.

Tera's power made it kill or be killed. One of them would die; there was no room for mercy. But, like anyone, Jason did not like being forced into corners where every choice was bad. He had become so tired as he kept falling short on Earth, stuck between bad and worse decisions. He had been faced with one hard choice after another as the people that should have been helping stood in his way.

The Network betrayed him over and over again, but he kept working with them because that was what it took. He failed the living as the victims piled high in Makassar, then had to destroy what was left when the bodies were turned into unliving monstrosities. He had to make deals with the very enemies behind those previous events, all the while planning to turn on them. In doing so, he became that which he hated most: a betrayer of trust.

He was improved from what he had become at that time. Not recovered, not entirely; there was no going back to what he was before, but he was able to live with himself again. Mended enough that he could put the hard choices of the past behind him, even if they would always be there. But now, once again, he was faced with a bleak proposition: Kill a woman – a girl – that he saw as a victim. It wasn't even really an option, as the alternative was to die.

No.

The refusal was a declaration, not just to himself but to the universe. He wasn't going to let it happen. Yes, this girl was an enemy. Yes, she had probably killed countless innocent people. Yes, many were more worthy of being saved than her. But here and now, he was done. The world had bent him to the point of breaking and it was trying to bend him again. It wanted him to kill this girl, but he was going to give her mercy. This time, the world was going to bend.

Jason's spiritual battle against the Builder was something he remembered not with his mind, but with his soul. His body had not been his own and it had been a spiritual war, in any case. One that a mind seated in the physical matter of a brain was inherently incapable of comprehending. But Jason was not the same man that warred with the Builder over his soul at iron-rank. He didn't even have a brain anymore, and his soul was not just a spiritual entity lurking behind his body. His soul and his body were one.

Jason still didn't remember much of what happened, like hearing echoes from the other end of a long tunnel. The memories were emotion more than anything; fear, resolve. A seemingly limitless will that screamed for him to capitulate with the force of a typhoon. Colin, joining him in the last stand for his soul. Defiance.

The one thing he had come to fully remember was a sensation. The Builder had not been able to harm his soul, but he could inflict a pain that transcended anything a physical body could experience. Jason's own spiritual attack was a paltry echo of that, something he had learned from that scathing sensation, barely remembered as it was.

The Builder had scoured Jason's soul, trying to force him to open it up and accept his oppressor. Jason had not. And now he fully remembered that pain; exactly what the Builder had done to him, and how. He had resolved to never use it. It was not something to

inflict even on an enemy. He had thus far drawn the line at far less savage soul attacks, even if sometimes he had needed a friend to help him not cross the line.

But that was not enough for what he needed to do now. He had to become like the Builder and inflict a suffering he had promised himself he never would. He wondered what Shade would say, but he only had himself in that moment, his own judgement. Judgement that had failed him before. He could feel his familiars inside, locked away and unable to advise him as he crossed a line he had resolved not to.

He could only tell himself that while he was replicating the Builder's actions, it was with the opposite of the Builder's intentions. That it was the only path to mercy. Was it a justification? He knew that, whatever he told himself, he had a hunger for power and control. The god Dominion had seen it from the beginning.

In the end, all he could do was the best he could with what he had. And what he had was a girl whose soul had trapped them both and would not let go until one of them was dead. She couldn't even end it now if she wanted to or she would have, he was certain. So he had to reach inside her soul and end it for her. But first, she had to let him in.

The only way he could shut off her power was to force his way into her soul and do it himself. He couldn't break in, any more than the Builder could with him. She had to let him, and there was no way she trusted him enough to allow that, whatever the circumstances. Sometimes, even when the mind said yes, the soul said no.

He would have to do what the Builder did to him. Make her suffer, as he had, until she capitulated. *If* she capitulated. And even then, he couldn't be sure it would work. He had never rummaged around someone else's soul.

He could just kill her. He knew what he was about to do and that, in the face of such miserable suffering, killing could be seen as a mercy in itself. But Jason wouldn't allow it. Fate had put this girl in his path and decreed that one of them would die. Fate could go fuck itself.

Transcendent light of blue, silver and gold started shining through Jason's skin as he lit up like a beacon. He drew on the power of his astral realm, his body shaking as he turned himself into something like a portal that only his power could pass through. It clashed with Tera's soul, the very thing that was binding him. This meant he didn't need to push through the suppression to attack it; it was right there waiting for him.

Tera fell but didn't hit the ground, instead floating up. Her spine arched and her wings, head and limbs were all yanked in the direction of the ground as if something was holding them while brutally pushing into her back. Her mouth opened in the image of a

scream, but at first, none came. Then there was a sonorous hum, building with every passing second, slowly rising in pitch as it grew louder.

Emresh Vohl was huddled with the civilians, despite his silver-rank. The adventurers had tried to recruit him in case of something breaking into the bunker, but he had refused them to their derision. But he was no adventurer, having ranked up on cores. He'd never fought anything more dangerous than a stablehand a rank lower than he was.

His choice has been validated when the ragged angel had barged into the room, battered and bleeding. The bronze-rankers trying to close the door on her had been thrown back as she shoved it open and stormed in, dripping silver-gold blood.

He knew that she was one of the messengers that people had been talking about, not an angel from the old elvish stories his mother told him as a child. But even as injured as she was, she still looked like one. There was something glorious about her, even under the blood, the wounds and the tattered armour.

The man that followed her was no such thing. He was all but naked, the blood painting his body covering him more than his red-stained under-shorts. He was in even worse condition, his body covered in savage lacerations.

Emreth had not wasted time using his silver-rank physicality to rush past others, not caring if a few children or old people were knocked aside. But he kept his gaze on the two figures, and he did not like the way the messenger looked at them. He'd seen that look on his father many times; the look of a man who saw assets and not people. It was not something he'd ever had a problem with until he was the asset.

The two intruders had a short exchange, him warning her in a voice that rang like a gong. She looked at him in shock and he seemed equally surprised. For a long moment, they just stared at one another. Then he started to glow and she was dragged into the air by an unseen force, her arms, legs and wings pulled downwards as if trying to drag her back.

The room was eerily quiet, civilians and bronze-rank adventurers equally huddled in silence as they looked on. Then came a base hum, slowly growing louder and higher until people started to moan and Emreth felt a pricking in his ears and eyes. A child cried as the rising pitch of the hum left blood trickling from her ear, more joining her as blood started seeping from the eyes, noses and ears of the young and the elderly. Then an aura washed over them, domineering yet protective; the authority of a benevolent dictator.

The sound stopped affecting the civilians, who looked on at the suffering angel and glowing man who was also starting to float into the air. Dark red leather started appearing

on his body, draping him in a robe. It soaked away the blood left on his exposed hands and face. When his face cleared, Emreth's blood ran cold.

Silver-rankers had excellent memories. Emreth knew that face, even if the dark brown eyes were now an alien blue-orange. He had last seen it on the floor of a tavern, shielded by the man's arms as Emreth and his boys kicked the man over and over.

Things started clicking into place. The mysterious person who had severely damaged his father's business interests, for some unknown slight. The way the man had taunted Emreth, all but asking for a beating. Emreth had gone to the tavern looking to beat someone and he now realised the man had offered himself up because he could take it.

He watched as the man's face vanished into a dark hood as a cloak that was not fabric but a living void manifested around him. He could just make out the silhouette of the man's sharp chin, beneath the glowing eyes.

Essence users rarely exhibited the base physiological functions of a normal body. They hardly ever blushed, hardly ever cried and never went to the toilet. Especially by silver-rank, only extremes of emotion could make their magical bodies replicate the base nature they had left behind. This left Emreth confused at the warm trickle he felt in his pants.

The most infinitesimal portion of power the Builder could exert would still be enough to annihilate a universe. Jason couldn't comprehend power on that scale, let alone match it. Yet, even at his power level, his facsimile of the Builder's assault on his soul was a horrifying thing to do to a person. Jason himself knew this better than anyone, and as he flayed Tera's soul, he felt an intense revulsion he had to push through to keep going.

It was the only potential path out that he saw leading anywhere but to her death, but he wondered again if death was not the greater mercy. He knew what the treatment he was giving her would do. It had taken him months and some of the best experts in the world to recover. He doubted the messengers would give her the same care that he had received.

He kept pouring on the pain, willing her to surrender. The faster she let him in, the quicker the pain would end, and if she didn't surrender at all, he would have to kill her anyway. Then, instead of mercy, he had taken her from death to excruciatingly miserable death. He had to steel his resolve over and over to continue, redoubling his efforts as his will squeezed her soul like a ball in his fist.

Jason didn't have a star seed, but he wasn't looking to take her over once he was allowed into her soul. All he needed was a connection, and in the course of his torturing

her, he realised that it was already there. He could feel a link, not between Jason Asano and Tera Jun Casta but between astral king and messenger. He could tell immediately that it had always been there, waiting. It was strange and made him feel uncomfortable. It was almost like messengers were built to be controlled.

Jason poured his will into that connection, every ounce of soul strength he could muster assaulting her anew. Finally, he felt the first, tiny tremble in her will to resist. Whatever that connection was, it left her hard-wired to obey, so long as he could activate it. That she was able to resist the inherent urge to surrender that came through it deeply impressed Jason, even if he wished she didn't. He desperately wanted to stop, although not near as much as she did, he knew.

He had to finish it. He had to push through, and make her give up. He floated over to her, his cloak drifting loosely around him. He had pushed away the power of her soul enough that he could use at least some of his powers. He reached out a hand, palm down in the space where her torso was arched up.

Yield. Your. Soul.

Her body trembled, then shook. Then she fell to the ground.