

Chapter 651

Mockery

The stasis cabin of the Carlos Crime Wagon was an adapted bunk room filled with stasis pods. Each pod contained an Order of Redeeming Light member, and Carlos regularly serviced the pods to make sure they were operating properly. Space being at a premium, it was a narrow cabin, making the maintenance work rather awkward.

Carlos grumbled under his breath as he worked. He'd been preparing for the next major step in his research, to which Jason was critical. That was the exact moment that Jason had chosen to wander off and test his aura techniques on any woman that hoveled into view. Now he'd gone off with his team on some ill-defined contract to find possibly nothing.

After finishing, Carlos left the cabin for the small washroom and was wiping pod gel off his hands when one of his assistants appeared at the door.

"Boss, that weird shadow guy is at the door."

"Show him in," Carlos told his assistant.

"He said you should come out."

Carlos grumbled as he made his way to the exit of the vehicle, through the hatch and down the metal stairs.

"What is it, Shade?" Carlos asked irritably.

"Mr Asano and his team have a question for you, Priest Quilido."

"Is it 'why did we go off on some pointless mission when we could be participating in world-changing research?'"

"No," Shade said. "It is not."

"Carlos," Jason said, projecting his voice through Shade's body. "Let me tell you about something I saw."

Jason explained what he'd seen in the town he scouted, from the heat-producing paint to the uniform mannerisms and strange heat signatures of the residents.

"What you're describing sounds like a heat-consuming parasite with a swarm hive mind," Carlos said. "I have a lot of research on creatures and objects that take people over in various ways, so I might be able to find something more specific."

"How long would that take?"

"A few hours. In the meantime, any information you could get from the auras of the people would help."

"Alright, I'll discuss it with the team."

With the skimmer floating in the rainforest canopy, Jason and his team sat and discussed their next move. As they went through various approaches, Jason pushed back against going in and scouting with his aura.

“You seem uncharacteristically nervous about using your aura,” Clive told him.

“Yeah,” Jason said as he absently nodded. “I’m grown accustomed to my aura being an absolute advantage. Something I can always rely on being the best at. Now I’m starkly aware that isn’t true and it makes me feel uneasy. I only caught a glimpse of the messenger, through Shade, and it still shook me. Even passively sensing the refinement of his aura through Shade’s senses spooked me.”

“You can’t let anxiety over someone being better at one thing stop you,” Humphrey told him.

“I know,” Jason said. “But I’ve also realised how much my aura powers have been a crutch. I need to prove that there’s more to me than that. To use every tool in the toolbox, before I forget how.”

“Good,” Rufus said. “That’s exactly what I taught you.”

Like Zara in Korinne’s team, Rufus was a late and temporary addition to Team Biscuit. He lacked experience working with the team and would eventually go back to his training centre in Greenstone.

Jason has a similar problem around teamwork, having been away for so long. Compared to Rufus, though, he still had the months in the Reaper’s astral space with the others. That time had welded the team into a cohesive unit. They still needed to kick off the rust and learn all the changes to each other’s powers, but those ingrained patterns were still there.

The team had spent good chunks of Jason’s convalescence going over their powers and formulating new strategies and tactics around them. Now they needed to get out in the field and use them.

“There’s another thing, though,” Jason said. “It’s been a while and we’ve barely worked together out in the field.”

“Someone got stomped and had to sit out most of the contracts,” Neil pointed out.

“I know,” Jason said. “I’m nervous about messing up. Making everything go wrong. And what if it isn’t like before? What if—”

“I’m not a big worshipper of the gods,” Sophie cut in. “But for the love of the gods, please shut up.”

“What?” Jason asked.

"We get it," she said. "You're in touch with your feelings, and that's great, but you are spending too much time with Rufus' mother."

"That's what I've been saying," Rufus said.

"For different reasons," Belinda told him. "Quiet you."

"Jason, there's been too much talking and too much thinking. That's always been an issue for you, but now it's reaching the point where you're getting in your own way. So here's what's going to happen. We're going to go to that town and you're going to look at the auras of all the creepy people. Then something is going to go wrong, they're all going to attack us and we're going to kick everyone's inside out. Everyone agrees with this plan."

"We do?" Neil asked, earning him a gentle elbow jab from Belinda.

"I'm not sure that's—" Clive began.

"*I said,*" Sophie cut him off, "Everyone agrees with this plan."

The group all turned to Humphrey, who was both team leader and Sophie's lover. He looked between Sophie and the rest of the team.

"Don't look at me," he said. "I heard everyone agrees with the plan."

"You know," Neil said, "Humphrey's mother is almost always right."

"What's she got to do with anything?" Humphrey asked.

"I was just thinking," Neil said. "Sophie may not always be right, but she'll punch people until they admit she is. She's kind of like a violent version of Humphrey's mother."

Humphrey's face was stricken with wide-eyed horror.

Jason was the only one to draw close to the town, again making use of the shade-houses and tree lines in the agricultural flatlands around it. The others waited in the edge of the rainforest for Jason to examine the town with his aura senses.

"I'm a little worried about Jason," Clive said. "It's not like him to be so hesitant."

"He's been anxious and fearful from the start," Rufus said. "Gary and I didn't see it at first, but Farrah saw through him. He's always had a knack for using aura masks, even before he knew what they were. It's like he tricks himself into becoming this outlandish person. Someone who can survive in the madness he always seems to find himself in."

"That persona is how he gets there in the first place," Neil said.

"Yes," Rufus said. "But I'm thankful for it. Jason's willingness to insert himself into a situation he could walk away from saved my life."

"It saved me from worse," Sophie added.

"We were low rank," Rufus said. "Our aura senses weren't as sharp as they are now and we didn't see through him. But Farrah trained his aura, and she saw how scared he

really was. How fragile. But after he came back from Earth, it's different. He can't – or maybe won't – hide his feelings. He lashes out like a cornered animal."

"He's getting better," Humphrey said. "But that wound is still there. I think he scared Emir."

"My mother likes to say that we can never go back to what we were," Rufus said. "The best we can do is try and decide who we'll be next."

"Talking to your mum is why everything takes so damn long," Sophie said. "How long does it take to aura scout one small town? It's barely more than a village. I think Jason may have missed the key element of the plan."

"Which is you running in and punching people?" Neil asked.

"Exactly," she said. "Simple is best when it comes to plans. I learned that from Humphrey. His mum made him read lots of books about strategy written by people who went on to die in battle. It doesn't say a lot about the value of their books if you ask me."

"They didn't *all* die in battle."

"Actually, the women writers mostly seemed to live," Sophie mused.

"I bet it's a pride thing," Belinda said.

"It's not a pride thing," Humphrey asserted. "They were warriors. It makes sense that they died in battle."

"I'm with Lindy," Clive said. "I never understood the whole male pride thing. Seems like a good way to get yourself killed for stupid reasons."

"Yep," Belinda agreed as she and Sophie nodded.

"Speaking of the plan," Rufus said, "I think we should make some clarifications. Specifically regarding the kicking-out of people's insides. The people in this town are more likely victims than perpetrators."

"If they're full of heat-sucking parasites," Belinda said, "they're probably past saving."

"That's most likely the case," Clive sadly agreed.

"We'll know more once Jason is done," Humphrey said.

"If he ever is," Sophie complained.

"Give him time," Humphrey said. "He said that technique takes a long time to use properly. I know Jason can be a bit frivolous, but you heard him earlier. I'm sure he's completely focused on the task at hand."

"That was a good sandwich," Jason mumbled as he sucked sauce off his fingers. "I need to find out what was in that sauce."

"Mr Asano," Shade said.

“I have to say, I’m loving how the elves around here do food. Sweet drinks and spicy tucker.”

“Mr Asano.”

“I wonder what they use to make bread. It’s not wheat, and it’s not what they used in Rimaros, either.”

“Mr Asano, Miss Wexler is rapidly shifting from impatient to violently impatient.”

“This technique takes time,” he said. “I have to slowly and carefully expand my senses unless I want people to notice my aura immediately. Even then, I’m still learning. I’m certain that’s how Benella and her rental henchmen found me at the park.”

“Rental henchmen?”

“I can only assume that’s what they were.”

“Why would that be the only possible assumption?”

“There’s no other reasonable explanation for how she ended up with flunkies.”

“We spied on people who confirmed they were working together.”

“That kind of thing is easily misinterpreted.”

“I cannot imagine why your team would worry that you aren’t giving this task you’re your focus.”

“Because I ate one sandwich? I don’t need my hands or my mouth to expand my aura.”

“But you do need concentration, Mr Asano.”

“And a sandwich helps me get into a balanced state of mind. Nagging does not, by the way.”

Despite his teasing of Shade, Jason had, indeed, been slowly and carefully expanding his senses into the town from his hiding place in a shrubbery on the outskirts. He was taking it even slower than he had while practising, in the hope of going undetected. This approach bore fruit as Jason extended his aura senses over the closest of the townsfolk as they walked by. They showed no reaction to his aura but, despite going unnoticed, Jason’s expression filled with sadness and rage.

“I got a closer look at one of the elves,” Jason told the team through voice chat. “I don’t think there’s any rescuing them. They have a death aura with some kind of swarm aura inside them. I’m fairly certain they’re walking corpses filled with parasites.”

“Can you get any more details?” Clive asked. “Anything you can pick up will help Carlos identify what we’re dealing with. Maybe even find a weakness we can exploit, or at least get a sense if whatever this is could be widespread enough to cover the southern region.”

“I’m looking,” Jason said. “Slow and careful, though, so give me some more time.”

Even Sophie didn’t complain at that, after the revelation that everyone in the town was dead.

Jason continued expanding his senses, examining the auras of other parasitised residents. Comparing them, he felt a familiar sensation from them, but only passingly so. It teased at his mind until he finally realised what it was: all of these people had creatures living inside them.

Unlike Jason’s symbiotic relationship with Colin, these were parasites. They took and gave nothing back. In Jason’s mind, Colin had given him far more than Jason had ever returned. Colin had kept him alive time and time again, not just staving off death but healing him up enough to keep fighting when he would have fallen.

When the Builder’s star seed tried to take over Jason’s body, Shade and Gordon had been banished back to the astral, their vessels destroyed. It was Colin who slowed the star seed as it claimed Jason’s body, helping him to hold on. It was Colin, nestled inside Jason’s soul, who offered support in his darkest moments. Without Colin, Jason would be dead or a slave.

The creatures that had taken the people of the town, both killing and enslaving them, were a mockery of what Colin and Jason shared. It filled him with a burning desire to go on a rampage, digging the parasites out of the townsfolk and annihilating every last one. He didn’t, but his fury flowed out through his aura, disrupting his partially mastered aura-hiding technique and alerting the town. As one, every elf in it through back their heads and let out an inhuman screech.

Chapter 652

Die Immediately Without Prompting

Jason's team exploded out of the rainforest as inhuman screeching came from the town ahead. Sophie was nothing more than a flickering blur while the others thundered over rice paddies, the terrain barely hindering the superhuman pace of silver rankers. Following them out of the rainforest were the twenty draconic bone spiders in magic armour that Humphrey had summoned while they waited. Behind them was Neil's lumbering chrysalis golem, a monolith of crystal that sank heavily into the mud, quickly getting left behind.

They felt Jason's aura flood out, infused with blind rage.

"That's not good," Neil said as they dashed.

Then they felt the rage vanish.

"Okay, that's *really* not good," Neil said.

Jason had carefully hidden his aura as he extended his senses over the town. It was the revelations of what had happened to the people in it that made him lose control. He could mask even strong emotions from showing in his aura under normal circumstances, but his new sensory technique was a work in progress. When using it to expand his senses stealthily, he lacked the same rigid control.

When his senses revealed that the townsfolk were actually dead people being puppeteered by some kind of parasite, that control slipped. His hidden aura was revealed as it flooded with rage, revealing his presence.

The townsfolk tossed aside their too-perfect normalcy on sensing Jason's rage, letting out a chorus of alien shrieks. They started rushing to Jason's location, faster than their ranks should have allowed. The cost of this was their bodies moving in an awkward and off-putting manner, as if filmed in crude stop-motion. It was damaging their bodies, some even breaking bones and falling over as they overtaxed themselves.

They had completely transformed from the pleasant façades they had been showing to wild and twisted berserkers. Their uncanny-valley appearance made plain that the elves were no longer people. Something stranger and more insidious was inside them, wearing them as suits.

Although this infuriated Jason, he managed to rein in his anger, rather than let it drive him. Oddly, his earlier explosion at Emir helped him regain control instead of letting his rage run rampant. Following that encounter, he had been dwelling on the anger waiting

just below the skin, ready to erupt at any provocation. It wasn't a revelation, but it was a wake-up call that he was not as mentally recovered as he'd previously believed.

Jason had been letting his anger control him for too long, and it was past time to start getting it in order. For all that fury felt strong, he knew that was a trap. It narrowed his vision, blinded his judgement and led him to choices he would come to regret. It also blocked him out of the powerful combat trance technique, which he could only achieve with a calm and balanced mind.

Now there was an enemy more than deserving of his anger, but he refused to let himself indulge in the emotion. He concentrated on all the training he had gotten from Rufus and Farrah about fighting with a cool head. Even with the enemy rushing at him, he closed his eyes and took a long, slow breath. Breathing was unnecessary, but made for a good meditative tool, helping him achieve a flow of calm. He let the breath out and his anger with it, allowing it to drift away.

Sophie arrived at his side, having moved across the entirety of the fields surrounding the town faster than the parasitised elves could reach Jason. She peered into his hood when she couldn't see his glowing eyes.

"What are you doing?" she asked. In response, he drew his sword.

"These people are dead," he told her. "I'm preparing to free them."

The oncoming enemy didn't give Jason any more time for explanation than that as they charged in on Jason and Sophie. There was no pattern to the attacks, just dozens of parasitised elves. They launched themselves through the air the moment they were close enough, literally jumping at them in wild, artless attacks. The elves dashed through the streets and out of buildings, quickly forming a mob.

Whatever intelligence had been guiding them to fake the role of a pleasant populace had turned to mindless frenzy like someone had flipped a switch. Their only tactic was to assault Jason and Sophie with a wall of bodies.

Before the mob could form too tight a pack, Jason and Sophie had moved to attack the frontrunners, kicking off a melee in the middle of the street.

Knowing that something had taken over the townsfolk, the entire team knew to be careful. The unknown parasite could potentially infect them, so until they were certain of what it was, caution was the first priority. Humphrey hadn't allow the rest of the team to charge blindly in after Sophie. The fields they were crossing had elves that were moving towards them in a frenzy, and while Sophie was past them before they had even really started to stir, the rest of the team was not.

Humphrey led the team forward more cautiously, trusting Jason and Sophie to hold their own. Their ability sets were both well-suited to this early stage of the conflict, before too many elves gathered together.

Sophie was always elusive in the face of the enemy, with abilities that would shield her from retaliatory effects. So as long as she was the one hitting and not being hit, she knew that she should be fine. She did not take the risk, however, regardless of how minor it was. Instead of landing hits, she chose to miss each target by a close margin.

Wind Blade was one of only two special attacks Sophie possessed, and the only one whose use was unconditional. It allowed her to make slashing gestures with any part of her body that launched blades of razor-sharp wind. Large gestures created long, slow-moving blades, while short, sharp gestures fired off small-but-swift projectiles.

Sophie making her attacks miss every enemy meant that she could instead use the motions to fire off wind blades at point-blank range, meaning that even the slow blades hit home. She soon started increasing her range when possible, given the unskilled mass of bodies being thrown at them.

The wind blades did not end their effectiveness by cutting into enemies. The silver-rank effect of the ability triggered a ring of cutting force from each target struck. Sophie had practised long and hard to master the nuances of this ability, actively negating the blades and rings before they struck herself or any friendlies. She could even eliminate just a part of a blade or ring, allowing two sides of a blade to pass around an ally.

Jason knew this, but was still rigorous about checking for friendly fire. Humphrey and Clive had been fighting alongside Sophie for the past few years, but Jason was still fitting back into the team's rhythms. He didn't trust himself for pinpoint coordination just yet.

Like Sophie, Jason's style was inherently evasive, but in a different manner. There were similarities, such as a reliance on skill and uncanny dodging through space displacement powers. But Sophie's approach was a domineering mix of raw speed and unmatched skill, challenging any foe to strike her down. Jason was very different, relying on obfuscation, disruption and erratic unpredictability unnerving his opponents over the course of the battle.

Jason's tactics began by sending a herd of Shade bodies to mix into the elves. With the sun high in the sky and the battleground being a wide street of dry dirt, there was little in the way of natural shadows, so Shade would serve instead.

Shade and Jason had worked on tactics to make Shade less vulnerable when the familiar was serving as a shadow-jump platform. The more Jason ranked up, the more

enemies were able to affect Shade's incorporeal form, making it a less reliable defence than it had in the past.

One of the ways that Shade did this was by moving his bodies in and out of shadows. While a shadow might be too small for Jason to jump through, Shade had no such restrictions. For the elves, though, it quickly became evident that they had no way of harming the familiar, which gave them the chance to use another tactic.

Jason conjured copies of his cloak on a multitude of Shade bodies, which danced through and around the elves. Even the wild, seemingly mindless enemy was thrown off as Shade variously ballooned out the cloak to block their view, sent blinding star motes flashing into their eyes and displaced space itself.

The space displacement had minimal effect, allowing Jason to turn a near-miss into a full-miss, but when two dozen cloaks were using it at once, the elves were disoriented and sent stumbling over one another. This had no effect on the incorporeal Shade and his intangible cloaks, leaving elves scattered about on the ground. This offered critical breathing room for the high mobility approaches of Jason and Sophie, who fared much worse against a shoulder-to-shoulder mob.

As for Jason himself, his cloak danced around him like a hazy cloud of darkness and stars. Alongside hiding Jason's movements, it shifted between tangible and intangible. In one moment it was grabbing or blocking enemies, and in the next letting go, causing them to lose balance as they tried to pull free or yank at the cloak, only to find the resistance gone. That was the instant Jason would strike, his sword unseen until it passed through the cloak.

When Shade's antics weren't enough to stop the constantly-growing mob from clustering up, Jason and Sophie would both escape, buying time and space to make a fresh approach. Jason used Shade bodies to shadow jump, while Sophie employed her Mirage Step ability.

Mirage Step was not a true teleport ability, but a time-manipulation power involving near-instantaneous movement. Like Eternal Moment, Sophie's main power for accelerating her personal time stream, Mirage Step gave what seemed like stopped time. She was progressing through time so much faster than the world around her that everything seemed frozen.

Mirage Step was even more limited than Eternal Moment, in that the time displacement between herself and the world around her made it hard to interact with. All Sophie could do while Mirage Step was active was move, but it had other advantages, especially after ranking the power up. These advantages were centred on the after-image

left behind when she used the power, and for which the ability was named. The after image would send out blades of dimensional force, similar to Sophie's wind blades. It also disoriented anyone who attacked the image, through short-lived mental illusions.

The elves that attacked the after image triggered an unusual reaction. Normally, there would be visible coloured light around the head of an enemy, indicating that they were caught up in illusions. For the elves, however, lights appeared all over their bodies. The disorienting effect was also unusually potent, causing the elves to collapse into thrashing heaps. Sophie took immediate advantage and used her Wind Wave power to gather them all up in a pile.

Wind Wave was a versatile ability that she could use for personal mobility, to deflect magical projectiles, or herd enemies, as she was currently doing. With the elves piled up, she used her personal time acceleration, Eternal Moment, to produce a storm of wind blades and launch them all at once. The blades slammed into the pile like an angry swarm of buzz saws, cutting first with the blades, then the secondary cutting rings. The result was an ugly meat grinder, the foul stench of death carried on the gusty air that came in the wake of the exploding wind blades.

Sophie was no offensive specialist, and her perfectly executed synergy of attacks were not enough to destroy most of the parasite-infested elf bodies. What she did accomplish by piling them up and slaughtering at least an appreciable number was one of the most valuable resources in any battle: time. Jason had deployed his affliction-spreading butterflies that were multiplying on the beleaguered elves.

One effect of all the chopping that Sophie did was that she and Jason got a look at the parasites that crawled out of the chopped up bodies. Many had been immediately sliced into pieces as well, but there were more than enough to get a look, with dozens of worms pouring out of every dismembered elf.

The parasites were brown worms, looking much like garden worms but around the length of a forearm. Their most notable feature was at the tip of each worm; a triangular chitin cap, almost like a drill bit. As the worms became afflicted by butterflies, Jason learned the ominous name of the creatures.

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- You have inflicted [Blood From a Stone] on [Parasitised Elf (host)].
 - You have inflicted [Inexorable Doom] on [World-Taker Worm].
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The initial cluster of elves had been handled by Jason and Sophie, but it was only a fraction of what Jason sensed coming their way. With his senses now openly spread over the town, he sensed a larger population than the town should have. This confirmed that

one of the reasons the town had gone silent was that the world-taker worms were claiming anyone that passed through.

Jason backed off as his team arrived, led by Humphrey and followed by Humphrey's summons. Sophie's efforts to gather and slice up the elves had brought them a brief moment to regroup.

"I sensed something in the town," Jason told Humphrey. "I'm not sure what; it seems shielded against magical perception and I barely noticed it at all. Now you're here, I'd like to take Clive and check it out."

"It could be important to handling these things," Humphrey agreed. "If not to this fight, then to the larger one, if there are more towns like this. Any clues on what these things are?"

"Something called a World-taker worm," Jason told him.

"That's not the kind of name I wanted to hear," Neil said. "I guess a 'die immediately without prompting worm' was too much to hope for."

"Clive can fight with us while you investigate," Humphrey told Jason. "You move better alone. Just open a portal when you find something for him to look at."

"Will you be alright without me?" Jason asked.

Humphrey looked at the magical butterflies already moving to intercept the approaching elves.

"Your presence will be felt."

Chapter 653

The Old Groove

The team only had a brief respite from the worm-host elves that were inundating them, rushing from every street and building in the town to hunt them down. While Humphrey and Jason quickly discussed Jason's departure, Clive drew out a ritual circle. Golden lines were left behind by the edge of his staff as he used it to draw, like scratching in the sand with a driftwood stick. The ritual, like the golden light itself, was an aspect of Clive's most fundamental ability.

Ability: [Enact Ritual] (Rune)

- Special ability.
 - Cost: varies.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Silver 4 (12%).

 - Effect (iron): Manifest lines of magic to draw out ritual diagrams. Materials required for a ritual may be used directly from a dimensional storage space instead of being placed within the diagram.

 - Effect (bronze): Create simple ritual diagrams to alter the parameters of magical items.

 - Effect (silver): Conjure mana lamps with enhanced efficiency and accumulation rate. Refined mana from the lamp can be used to enhance ritual magic.
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The ritual was designed for Clive and Belinda to stand on, altering the parameters of their magical weapons. Belinda was using her Specious Sorcerer ability to take on a spellcaster role, avoiding getting too close to their enemies.

Ability: [Specious Sorcerer] (Charlatan)

- Special ability.
- Cost: Very high mana.
- Cooldown: 6 hours.

- Current rank: Silver 4 (09%).

- Effect (iron): Gain a significant increase to the [Spirit] attribute and the ability to use magical tools. Your maximum mana increases and you gain an ongoing mana recovery effect.

- **Effect (bronze):** Gain the ability to cast a number of basic spells.
 - **Effect (silver):** Gain the ability to cast additional spells, based on the gear you have equipped.
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With a robe, plus a wand in one hand and a staff in the other, she was equipped much like Clive. She had supplied herself with decent-quality items, albeit not the equal of the weapons and armour Gary had crafted to use with her Counterfeit Combatant power. They certainly weren't a match for Clive's staff and wand, which were a legendary growth item set he had picked up at iron rank, before Belinda had even joined the team.

Both Belinda and Clive's weapons would be affected by Clive's ritual. Instead of the normal bolts and beams of force for Clive, and fire for Belinda, their staves and wands would produce cold attacks. They didn't know much about the parasites infesting the townsfolk, but they seemed to feed on heat. That made cold Clive's best guess as to what would be the most harmful to them.

Clive finished his preparations by using another ability to attach ritual circles to their weapons directly, the floating magic diagrams, somewhat akin to Jason's system windows. Not wasting time, Clive and Belinda were already on the attack by the time Jason vanished into the shadows, blasting the onrushing elves with bolts and beams of magic.

The team set up so that Sophie, Rufus and Humphrey moved in a circle to shield Neil, Clive and Belinda from attacks on each side. Stash and Belinda's familiars were inside the circle as well, while Humphrey's dragon-bone spiders roamed out to run interference.

With the numbers they were facing, efficiency in both time and mana was important. In extended fights, especially against so many opponents, they needed to make the most of their big-ticket abilities, and even their mid-range heavy-hitters. The right abilities needed to be ready, with enough mana to use them, when the optimal moments arose.

Managing this for the team had become Belinda's job. Their time apart meant that the team had to learn all-new ways to work together. Not only was their teamwork out of practise but their old bronze-rank strategies were no longer sufficient. They and their power sets had gone through massive changes, and it was taking time to find the old groove.

One of the more defining changes to how they worked together was that Belinda had taken on a tactical director role. While Humphrey generally called the play, it was Belinda who helped the team execute the details. She was always tracking who could do what and when, courtesy of Jason's interface, and the team's efficiency was spiking as a result.

Belinda had fallen into this role for several reasons, starting with her power set. Belinda's powers placed her in a position to facilitate the rest of the team in various ways, and ranking up had only amplified that factor. She could reduce or entirely reset cooldowns, as well as duplicate key abilities.

Even Belinda's magic tattoo could reset some of her cooldowns, being the silver-rank version of the one she had at iron rank. She had been careful to get it after what happened at bronze. After a night drinking with Sophie, she woke up with a magic tattoo that produced hot sauce.

Judgement was key to Belinda's power set, as almost every power she used to assist the team would live or die on the timing. The only exception was her aura.

Ability: [Masterful] (Adept)

- **Aura (recovery).**
- **Base cost: None.**
- **Cooldown: None.**

- **Current rank: Silver 4 (11%).**

- **Effect (iron): Abilities of allies within the aura come off cooldown more quickly.**

- **Effect (bronze): Mana and stamina costs for the essence abilities of allies are slightly reduced. Has greater effect on abilities with ongoing costs than instantaneous costs.**

- **Effect (silver): Boons affecting allies have slightly increased effect.**

The reliable but generalised bonuses were nice, but weren't anything that would turn a battle on its head. It was Belinda's active powers that could make for clutch plays, where the trump card of an ally became a handful of trump cards and clinched a win.

Belinda's ability to manage not just her own abilities but those of the team was key, but only the start of why she was now the tactical centre. Every essence user had their mind enhanced by their spirit attribute, but there were differences in how that applied specifically. Clive had always been the smartest guy in the room when it came to deciphering the complexities of sophisticated and exotic magic. Ranking up had only enhanced his ability to comprehend the most sophisticated nuances of magic. Jason's mental advancements were perceptual, allowing him to better process sensory input greater than others of his rank. In Belinda's case, it was a peerless ability to multitask. The return of Jason and his party interface made that trait not just valuable but the centrepiece for her new role on the team.

Jason's party interface was one of the most impactful contributions he brought to the team, now that they were silver rank. It provided so much information that when the whole team was in a party, there was too much visual clutter to even see. From health condition body indicators to mana and stamina bars to cooldowns for every active ability, each team member had to customise the interface to their own needs.

Humphrey, Sophie and Jason himself had the most pared-down interfaces. They all had to move fast and get deep in the action, so minimum obstruction was the goal. Being the healer, Neil maintained a more robust interface so he could monitor the team, but that did not compare to Belinda. She tracked every active cooldown of every team member in real-time, along with the mana they had to use their powers.

It was a mess, but one that gave Belinda an unrivalled tool for enhancing her effectiveness. Only she was able to parse all that data, let alone do so while actively participating in combat. She was the one who saw the gaps and plugged them, either by directing a teammate or by employing her own versatile power set.

Belinda's new authority in the team came with growing pains. Jason's interface gave Belinda the metrics to dig out the team's inefficiencies and zero in on their inefficient habits. It was good in the long run, but no one enjoyed having their shortcomings pointed out.

"Neil, throw out some more spells," she instructed. "Your mana is too close to full. Use Verdant Cage on cooldown to slow down the incoming elves as much as you can. Focus on the fields, where the existing plants will strengthen the power. Then use Reels of Fortune to dump mana; my power is ready to help you with the cooldown so you can triple-cast it."

Ability: [Blessing of Readiness] (Adept)

- Special ability (recovery).
- Base cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: Varies.

- Current rank: Silver 4 (10%).

- Effect (iron): This spell can only affect an ally and not yourself. The cooldown of the next ability used by the target is reduced by up to one minute. The cooldown of this ability is equal to the time taken from the cooldown of the target ability.

- Effect (bronze): The affected ability can have the cooldown reduced by up to ten minutes.

- **Effect (silver):** This spell can be used one additional time while on cooldown. The cooldown incurred by the second use is added to the original, and the spell cannot be used again until the full cooldown is complete.
-

Rough edges were no surprise after the team had spent years apart. It was more than Jason's absence, as the rest of the team had drifted apart in the wake of his loss. Neil and Belinda had worked together, protecting Jory as he roamed the world in dangerous times. As for Sophie, Humphrey and Clive, they had pursued their vendetta against the followers of Purity and the Builder. Clive had played third wheel for almost two years as he watched the other two awkwardly circle one another, the ghost of Jason in-between them. Even worse were the regular debriefs on their relationship progress, demanded of Clive by Belinda every time they all met up.

"I thought your job was to make us efficient," Neil complained to Belinda. "Explain to me how having almost full mana is an efficiency problem and not just efficiency."

"Your aura is feeding us way more mana than normal from all these worms dying," she said. "You're letting mana go to waste because you can't hold any more."

Ability: [Spoils of Victory] (Prosperity)

- **Aura (recovery, conjuration, boon, drain).**
 - **Base cost: None.**
 - **Cooldown: None.**

 - **Current rank: Silver 4 (02%).**

 - **Effect (iron):** Effect (Iron): Allies within your aura recover mana and stamina for each enemy that dies within your aura, also receiving a minor healing effect. You can loot enemies that die within your aura.

 - **Effect (bronze):** Your [Spirit] attribute is temporarily increased each time an enemy dies within your aura.

 - **Effect (silver):** Enemies that die within your aura leave behind orbs of health and mana that can be collected by allies to gain healing and recovery effects.
-

"Thank you for the orbs, by the way," Humphrey chimed in. As the most mana-hungry member of the team, as well as being highly mobile, finding mana boosts scattered around the battlefield was a massive boost. Neither the healing nor the mana gains were exceptional, but especially with a swarm monster like the worms, they added up.

"Your aura should have maxed out your spirit buff as well," Belinda told Neil. "Only using that power on shields and healing is a waste."

The rest of the team was also giving their all, adventurers and familiars alike. Belinda's astral lantern familiar was firing off its own force bolts, focusing on any worms attempting to sneak up on the team while they were distracted. Worms that had escaped both Sophie's wind blades and Jason's afflictions were already crawling along the ground, seeking out the team in moments of inattention.

Humphrey was the most vulnerable as he was a melee fighter. Sophie and Rufus were as well, but her grace and speed, plus his elegant elusiveness, made them untouchable. They moved like dancers of fast-forward, reminding everyone that no one else on the team could touch them for pure skill.

Humphrey was also highly skilled, but so much of how he fought was about the application of power, which was not useful against enemies that were weak and numerous. It also didn't help that his powerful attacks sent worms spraying out of the elves he cut apart. Without the evasiveness of Sophie and Rufus, he found the worms splashing over him.

To minimise his exposure, Humphrey was modifying his usual combat style. His usual fast-paced aggression was not ideal for defending and his heavy attacks were overkill against the worm-laden elves. He focused more on lateral movement than charge-forward aggression, and on skill rather than overwhelming power. It's not that Humphrey didn't have the skill – his mother would never have stood for it – but it wasn't his strongest area. Key to making his adapted style work was his sword. Of his two conjured weapons, he usually favoured the largest. For his current situation, however, the smaller sword was the right choice.

Ability: [Razor-Wing Sword] (Wing)

- **Special ability.**
 - **Cost: High mana.**
 - **Cooldown: None.**

 - **Current rank: Silver 4 (11%).**

 - **Effect (iron): Conjures a sword in the shape of a wing. Movement powers are enhanced while wielding it. Ineffective when used with special attacks best suited for large or heavy weapons.**

 - **Effect: (bronze): Feathers from the wing sword can be used as projectiles.**

 - **Effect: (silver): Feathers from the wing sword can be animated to intercept physical projectiles.**
-

The Razor-Wing Sword was stylised as an angel wing of white and gold, with glossy metal feathers. It could fire razor feathers from the blade, which Humphrey was making the most of to pick off loose worms. As of silver rank, it also produced feathers that floated around him to intercept projectiles. As this included worms flinging themselves at him, Humphrey was able to fight in relative safety.

Humphrey was still able to be effective, despite changing up his style, but he was not fighting at full effectiveness. He was forced to be careful instead of bold; passive instead of taking the fight to the enemy. He had to be constantly vigilant, even with his defensive measures. This was especially true when he had to stand his ground between parasitised elves and his team members.

Neil took some of the load in those moments, dropping a characteristically well-timed shield over Humphrey. As for Humphrey, that was when he deployed what was his most useful power, given the circumstances. His Fire Breath power sprayed out like a flamethrower, burning up waves of elves and eliciting shrieks like those Jason's aura had drawn out. It was extremely effective, despite the worms feeding on heat, because it was not ordinary fire.

Ability: [Dragon Might] (Dragon)

- **Aura (recovery).**
- **Base cost: None.**
- **Cooldown: None.**

- **Current rank: Silver 4 (13%).**

- **Effect (iron): Allies have increased [Power] and [Spirit].**

- **Effect (bronze): Fire created by your essence abilities becomes dragon fire.**

- **Effect (silver): Allies have increased resistance to effects that reduce the [Power] and [Spirit] attributes.**

Humphrey's aura turned any fire produced by his abilities into dragon fire, which was significantly more troubling to deal with. It was certainly beyond the power of the parasite worms to feed on.

The biggest problem with Fire Breath, and the reason Humphrey didn't usually rely on it as a mainstay, was that it was extremely mana-hungry. Fortunately, the team had many methods of replenishing mana. Clive's aura and Belinda's astral lantern familiar both did so, as did the crystals floating around Humphrey from his own Crystallise Mana ability. Neil's orbs were a boost, and Humphrey's equipment also leaned heavily into retaining or

replenishing mana. The net result was Humphrey possessed an extraordinary amount of sustain for someone with his power set.

Humphrey's greatest advantage, however, was not his powers, his training or his gear; it was the humility to recognise that he was not the critical figure in this combat. He didn't make any bold rushes or seize any perceived opportunities. He did the work, stayed the course and trusted in his team.

Chapter 654

Grisly Chore

While Humphrey was only adequate as a personal participant in the battle against the parasitised elves, his contribution was still large. This came through the other assets he brought to the combat, starting with his cohort of summons.

Humphrey's dragon-bone soldiers, the spartoi, had been modified by his powerful, if unpredictable, summoner's dice. In this case, the soldiers had been called up in the form of spiders with fire powers. It wasn't ideal for fighting their current enemy, but randomness was the price of such a potent item. At least they had managed to slog through the fields, unlike Neil's golem. That had been left behind after it half sunk into a rice paddy.

Humphrey directed the soldiers to form a cordon, intercepting the elves approaching from all sides. Only twenty summons was not enough to block them all, but they at least helped prevent the team from being overrun. Unfortunately, Humphrey had to command them to stop spitting burning webs over the elves.

The flames his summons could create because they were affected by a magic item were too removed to count as Humphrey's own fire. As such, Humphrey's aura did not transmute it into dragon fire, and the heat-hungry worms absorbed it. The affected elves had their flesh burned, but being dead were unaffected unless they were low rank enough that it burned them away entirely.

Like other forms of conversion they had seen, becoming a corpse-host for worms seemed to rank up the body. Most of the elves being slaughtered were ordinary people ranked up to iron. Their main threat came from the worms that shot out when the bodies were cut apart. While the higher-ranked ones were burned by the flames of Humphrey's summons, though, the worms inside didn't care. They devoured the heat, which gave their scorched hosts a burst of strength and speed. After witnessing that only a couple of times, Humphrey ordered his spartoi to stop using fire.

Although the summons had the numbers, the most powerful member of Humphrey's cohort was naturally Stash. The mirage dragon had taken on the form of a monster called a spriklish, which was essentially a massive sea urchin atop three giraffe legs. Its main body was the size of an economy hatchback, and it attacked by shooting spines that weren't especially dangerous, at least to an appropriate-rank adventurer. It also had many weaknesses. The long legs were slow and thin, making it easy to topple the creature. Even better, leaving the body up on its high legs made it easy pickings for ranged powers. It had

the ability to rapidly heal, but not fast enough to overcome the attacks of a ranged adventurer.

What made the spriklish a valuable form was that it could shoot spines very rapidly and with pinpoint accuracy. Against the multitudinous-but-frail worms, it left them pinned to the dirt road by spines. Rapid spine regrowth meant that endurance wasn't a problem either.

Stash proved so effective at eliminating the growing sea of loose worms that Belinda sent her echo spirit familiar to mimic him. A second spriklish appeared, looking like a cheap hologram replica. The spines it fired were magical force rather than physical spines, but they worked just as well.

Clive also had his familiar, Onslow, but was holding him in reserve. He wanted the tortoise fully charged up so that he could cover for Clive once he joined Jason. There was one more support, though, who arrived late to the combat.

Neil's chrysalis golem was slow and lumbering. Too slow to keep up with the team as they crossed the rice fields, it had last been seen sinking into a paddy, abandoned to the tender mercies of the parasitised elves. It at least had distracted some of the elves who had gone from farming to frenzy, chasing after the team as they made their way to the town.

The golem's singular power was to shroud itself inside a chrysalis that was near-indestructible, at least to attackers of its own rank. It underwent a transfiguration inside before emerging in a new form, adapted to the battle at hand. Going through the process was not swift, and the golem was ill-suited for short battles. More often than not, they would be over before the summon had undergone its transformation.

As was normal for a power with so many disadvantages, it was formidable should the right circumstances appear. At silver rank, the golem was far better at adapting to enemies and environments, compared to the crude attack reactions that had shaped its lower-rank transformations. When the transformed golem finally appeared over the battlefield, its crystal body was glimmering brightly in the sun.

The golem's new form was a giant, crystalline wasp, the size of a bread van. It had sixteen long, multi-jointed arms, each ending in a hand of narrow, barbed fingers. The wasp came buzzing over the trees and hovered over the battle briefly before descending into the fray.

Wholly unlike its ungainly initial form, the giant insect darted around like a dragonfly, wings buzzing as they flapped in a rapid blur. Its hands reached out and plunged into one

elf after another, jabbing in and out. Each time a hand emerged, dead worms dangled from the barbs on its fingers.

Neil's transfigured golem marked a turning point in the fight. Having configured itself to annihilate hosts and pluck out the parasites within, it alleviated the pressure on the team. They still had to fight and be careful about it, but they were less worried about running into desperate moments.

There were still more and more elves emerging from across the town, however. With a population of several thousand, there was no shortage of bodies. The team even had to move, having no interest in using the piled up dead as a bulwark. They crossed a field of corpses to an empty stretch of wide road and then proceeded to create a fresh charnel house of elven bodies.

The team were all aware that the elven corpses they were laying out were not monsters but victims. They were adventurers, used to laughing in the face of death, but only Rufus had witnessed such a scene before. He had met Gary and Farrah in a town of around the same size, where the population had also been turned into walking corpses.

With the push of the enemy lessened by the arrival of Neil's devastating golem, the fight had lulls that were not entirely welcome. The team bantered as if they were not surrounded by death, trying to keep their mind off the horror they were participating in. The townsfolk had been dead before the team arrived, but they were still aware that they were cutting down mothers and brothers. They all turned their eyes from the reality of how many of the bodies belonged to children.

"Whoever did this is going to burn," Sophie growled.

Not even Humphrey disagreed with Sophie's sentiment of revenge, but the moment was soon over as more elves ran to the slaughter.

"It feels like they'll never stop coming," Neil grimly opined.

"They will," Humphrey said, but he was unable to muster anything but weariness to his tone.

The fight turned from a dangerous battle to a grisly chore as the team eliminated one parasite host after another. Jason's butterflies still flew around, but many worms still crawled away. If they ended up needing to hunt them all, it would be a tedious task.

The worm hosts had apparently turned mindless when triggered, despite having been able to mimic the townsfolk at least enough to lure visitors to their doom. It led the team into a false sense of security, and the most dangerous moment of the battle came as they thought it was reaching a clean-up stage. Whatever intelligence drove the worms held

back a large number of hosts, sending out just enough to keep the team active. Then they rushed in to swamp the team with pure numerical advantage.

Despite being surprised, the team reacted with professionalism, their readiness never having truly slacked off. Rather than push back hard, Humphrey instructed the team and his bone spiders to stop warding off elves and let them cluster up. Sophie even helped, rounding them up with her Wind Wave power. Once they were nice and collected, it was Neil's turn to step in.

Of everyone in the team, it was Neil who had the hardest time ranking up. More than any other member, his power set had abilities that were high-cooldown, circumstantial or both, making them hard to use on a regular basis. Even his summon was hard to raise up, with battles often ending before the summon could enter its chrysalis, let alone exit. As for his healing and support powers, the excellence of his team actually hurt him. In more fights than not, there was little call for Neil's abilities.

Neil was best served in critical fights, but constantly chasing the edge would get the team killed, sooner or later. The rest of the team had a variety of attack powers they could use. The biggest problems were Humphrey, Belinda, Clive and Rufus, all of whom advanced an extra step faster because they were human.

At low ranks, the human advantage in ability growth speed mattered little, but now they were at the wall. When ranking up abilities took exponentially longer, even a minor advantage would add up over time.

Like many healers, Neil used a lot of his downtime to raise his healing powers slowly but reliably on civilians. It was also fulfilling to help people in need, reminding Neil why he'd joined the Church of the Healer in the first place.

Even so, many of Neil's powers could only be deployed in action. Without the team falling into dire straits, many of Neil's powers went unused. From his overwhelming single-target buff to wide-area heals and cleanses, all of Neil's big spells had an impact, but only when the circumstances were right. Even though such abilities inherently rose more quickly than others, it still made them awkward to use.

Ability: [Reaper's Redoubt] (Shield)

- Special ability (dimension, disease, unholy).
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: 6 hours.

- Current rank: Silver 3 (98%).

- Effect (iron): Take allies into a dimensional space briefly while flooding the area with death energy, dealing disruptive-force damage, necrotic damage and inflicting [Creeping Death] on everything in the area.
 - Effect: (bronze): Allies undergo extreme mana replenishment while in the dimensional space.
 - Effect: (silver): Enemies are afflicted with [Death's Grip]
 - [Creeping Death] (damage-over-time, disease, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until the disease is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
 - [Death's Grip] (unholy): The effects of healing are reduced. This effect is initially weak but is enhanced by any necrotic damage suffered by the victim.
-

As a healer, Neil had little in the way of destructive power, but the one ability he did have was devastating. Although more and more elves continued to rush at them, his power provided the team with a reset. When they emerged from the dimensional space Neil created, the worms and their elven hosts in a wide area were rotted and dead. The same was true of plants, trees and even the wooden buildings, the closest ones having collapsed.

“Did I just sense our healer blanketing the area in death and murdering everyone and everything?” Jason asked through voice chat. It was light and jovial, as if they weren’t surrounded by death, even though he mentioned it specifically. They each knew from Farrah that Jason had once encountered what they’d all gone through on a much wider scale. They realised he wasn’t being flippant over death but telling them to do what they could to put it out of their minds until the job was done.

“I had to do it,” Neil said. “Someone ran off by himself and left us to do all the fighting.”

“Hey, I have an important role,” Jason said defensively. “On an unrelated note, chewing sounds don’t come through my voice chat, right?”

“Not the time,” Humphrey scolded. Unable to put all the deaths aside, even for the moment, his face was filled with rage and nowhere to put it. He could kill townsfolk victims and massacre worms all day, but it wouldn't give him the person behind it all. The hope was that Jason found them, although that wasn't why he reached out.

“I just talked with Carlos,” Jason reported. “I updated him on what we’ve seen.”

“And?” Humphrey asked.

“He said that world-taker worms are bad.”

“Oh, they’re bad,” Neil said. “I’m glad we figured that out. Extremely helpful.”

“More helpful than sarcasm,” Belinda muttered.

Chapter 655

Inferior

Nervousness was not a normal sensation for a messenger. When the adventurers arrived, Pei Vas Kartha had been in her hidden underground lair, as usual, managing the worm implantations. She was confident that they would not sense her presence, as any non-messenger perception would be firmly but subtly blocked. The sophisticated aura magic rituals had been inscribed into the facility by someone far stronger than Pei herself.

It was not the first group of adventurers to arrive. Pei remained until she sensed an absurd aura flood the town. It was angry and startling powerful, but that was not what disturbed her. The aura was not that of a messenger, yet it undeniably carried properties that belonged to messengers.

There were several elements of that aura that Pei found unnerving. One was that she was not used to anyone of her rank having a stronger aura than her. She knew it was possible for non-messengers to have stronger auras than normal, but seeing it for herself was unsettling. Then there was the nature of the aura. Not only did it carry something akin to that of a messenger, but it was so oppressive that it cast a looming shadow over her soul.

She caught herself shrinking her shoulders and then pushed them back up, angrily reasserting her posture. She was not going to bow down to some random aura. It wanted her to feel small and unworthy, as if she had been judged and found wanting. As if she had sinned. That the person it belonged to would not even be able to sense her made it even more galling.

Then she remembered that odd strain in the aura of messenger-like power. She wondered how well-hidden she truly was and, in a moment of crippling shame, found herself thankful to be shielded from even such powerful senses.

The word 'inferior' slithered into her mind, like one of the worms she'd been implanting into the elves. She snarled, feeding her weak emotions into the flames of rage. Even so, she did not lose control and lash out. She extended her senses past the protection of her lair, careful not to expose her aura. She needed a better sense of what was happening above.

She sensed the adventurers fighting the worm-host, realising they were stronger than the last ones. They were violently undoing so much of Pei's work by slaughtering the hosts, but she did not rush out to intervene. While she had the pride of messenger superiority, she was not fool enough to confront such a powerful team, at least while they

were fresh. She would wait until the battle had exhausted them before looking for opportunities to pick them off.

The town's elven population had been overtaken by parasitic worms that were using the townsfolk as host bodies, pretending everything was still normal. The arrival of Jason's team had changed that. The townsfolk became frenzied berserkers, throwing themselves at the team from every direction.

Jason and Sophie fended off the first wave until the rest of the team turned up. Once they did, Jason went off in search of something that had tweaked his senses. It was faint enough that he wasn't entirely certain that he wasn't imagining it at first. He methodically searched, using his stealth abilities to avoid the enemies charging his team.

While he moved, Jason relayed what the team had learned about the worms through Shade to Carlos, still in the city of Yaresh. World-taker-worms turned out to be something on which Carlos had a decent amount of notes, and once he had a name, he was able to dig out some research records. This was specifically because of his research into various means of taking over the bodies of innocent people, with world-taker worms being an example. He had collected notes from other researchers as part of his own endeavours.

"I knew I had these," Carlos relayed back through to Jason. "Interestingly, this particular breed of worms has colour gradations that indicate—"

"I'm more in the market for practical facts that will help me right this second," Jason interrupted him. "Basically, how are they going to try to kill us? Also – and this is the big one - how do we make them not do that?"

While Carlos took him through the salient points, Jason continued his search. Around the time he found what he suspected he was looking for, Carlos had moved from more practical details and onto 'interesting points of note.' Jason contacted the team to share what he knew while Carlos headed for the Adventure Society. With seven teams all searching the same region, it was critical to disseminate the information.

"The worms maintain the host body's functions," Jason explained to the team through voice chat. "Enough to make a passable facsimile of being alive, anyway. That's why they don't have the zombie look, even though they're dead."

"And how they pass themselves off as people," Rufus said. "At least long enough to get people close enough to infest them as well."

"I'd assume so," Jason agreed. "You want to avoid the worms digging into you. You can't heal them out because they'll just absorb the life magic and multiply. You need to

physically gouge them out of the body and then heal the wound from doing so, once you've extracted all the worms."

"Charming," Belinda said. "Any good news?"

"Actually, yes," Jason said. "They like to go after critical organs, like the brain and the heart."

"How is that good news?" Sophie asked.

"We have neither," Neil said. "We're all basically sacks of magic, blood and meat. No critical organs they can devour to kill us instantaneously."

"It's a problem if too many of them get inside you, though," Jason said. "It's harder to take over essence users of our rank, but not impossible. If enough of them get inside you, they can hijack the magical matrix that makes your sack of blood and meat work. That means taking control of you."

"You know, my mum wanted me to be a merchant," Neil said bitterly. "Travel, money. Not being eaten from the inside out by worms."

"I did say they were bad," Jason said. "Carlos said that they're classified as an apocalypse beast."

"That would suggest these worms are what's responsible for the whole region going silent," Clive said. "Which leads to the question of whether this is just the next disaster in the queue, or if the messengers brought them here."

"I'm hoping you can help me figure that out," Jason said. "I'm going to open up a portal, so come on through."

A dark portal opened up next to Clive, but he didn't step through immediately. Magic light seeped through the front of his robe and quickly coalesced into a tortoise shape. Clive's familiar, Onslow, was a tattoo on Clive's torso when not manifested. When he appeared, he was a flying tortoise that could change his size and wield potent attack magic. Each segment on his shell bore a glowing rune, representing one elemental power he could use. Clive patted Onslow affectionately on the neck.

"I'll need you to cover for me, buddy."

One of the runes on Onslow's back stopped glowing as a lightning bolt shot out, chaining between enemies.

"That's the way," Clive said and went through the portal. He emerged from the other end of the portal in some kind of underground space. Light filtered down through cracks between a wooden floor above, dust dancing in the beams. The floor and three of the walls were hard-packed dirt, and an old ladder led up to an open trapdoor.

The last wall in the room was very different, being made of polished slate bricks. Set into it was a pair of double doors made of carved wood.

Unlike the boards above, the wood of the door was extremely well made and fitted, with no cracks to peer through. It also wasn't painted in the same heat-radiating green paint as the town buildings, and was instead covered in elaborate magic sigils. They glowed very faintly and shifted under his gaze, the lines slithering like serpents. He glanced at Jason, who was standing in front of the doors.

"What do you think?" Jason asked as Clive moved to examine the doors, fascination lighting up his expression.

"I have no idea," Clive said excitedly as he opened his storage space.

Clive's storage power, Rune Gate, was a little less convenient than Jason's, Belinda's and Humphrey's. Where they could all just pluck items out of the air, Clive needed to open a miniature portal, ringed by floating runes, that he could reach into and take things out of. Even so, Clive had arguably the most useful storage ability, as it could also be used as a regular portal power or to enhance the strength of his ritual magic.

Plucking out strange devices one by one, Clive used them to examine the door before shoving them back into storage. One looked like an hourglass and another like a magnifying glass. There was an opaque orb that flashed various colours and a set of large crystals, strung together on a line. Clive threw various powders at the door from bags, from ground-up lesser monster cores to chalk power mixed with salt and infused with magic. All the while, Clive jotted notes into a book he left on a small levitating table.

"You know this isn't an academic exercise, right?" Jason asked him. "Our friends are fighting up there."

"It's fine," Clive said absently, not looking away from his work. "Most of those elves were normal people. The worms might be silver and bronze rank, but artificially ranked-up bodies are much weaker than the genuine article. You've fought enough of the converted to know that."

"Yeah," Jason said. "You know that I fought a new kind of converted on Earth, right? Not based around the Builder's clockwork cores, although the higher-ranked ones used modified cores to stabilise their own conversion process."

"You've mentioned," Clive said.

"I'm not sure that I mentioned that the guy who ran the organisation they came from left me a vault full of secrets. Including all the research on their conversion project."

"Are you saying you can make converted?"

"No. Well, maybe. But I think he was hoping that I could refine the process."

“Why you? That’s not your area of expertise.”

“I think his choice was more to do with trusting me to use it properly. I’m pretty sure he wanted me to find a way to give regular people powers, without needing a truckload of essences. They wouldn’t match an essence user, sure, but sometimes quantity over quality is the way to go.”

“Why would he want that?”

“I’m not sure. Both he and Dawn have made it clear that somewhere down the line, I have another fight coming. What that is, I don’t know, but everything this psycho did was in preparation for it. He wanted me to take over for him after he was dead.”

“You killed him?”

“He killed himself because he knew that I wouldn’t let him live.”

That finally caused Clive to pause and he turned to look at Jason.

“Farrah never told us that.”

“Farrah wasn’t there for everything. How is that door going?”

Clive turned his attention back to the door.

“This is a ritual magic paradigm, unlike anything I’ve ever seen. This is otherworldly ritual magic, like the astral magic the Builder cult was using.”

“Not like the local stuff, then.”

“Even more so than what the cult was using. We have magic that interacts with auras, but it’s simple and crude.”

“Like the aura beacons used for signalling over long distances.”

“Exactly. The water link system is as elaborate as it gets, and there’s a reason Farrah and Travis are looking to replace it. The efficiency and practicality leaves a lot to be desired.”

“And this magic does it better?” Jason asked.

“It makes sense that messenger ritual magic interacts with auras in far more sophisticated ways than any of ours, given what we know about them. This is beyond my expectations, though.”

“Do you even know what this magic is doing?”

“Oh, that’s simple enough. The door just has some simple locking magic. The fancy part is the anti-detection magic that is shrouding whatever is behind it. Frankly, I’m amazed you noticed this was here.”

“Can you open it?”

“Oh, that’s not a problem,” Clive said. “It’s essentially the same magic we use in this world. The problem is that the alarm is part of the anti-detection magic. I don’t understand

enough about how it works to stop the alarm from going off. It incorporates the intrinsic properties of messenger auras, which I can't replicate. At least this seems to confirm that whatever's going on here, the messengers are behind it."

"Would I be able to replicate the messenger aura?"

"I was wondering the same thing," Clive said. "It'll take time and study, though. It's not something we can quickly knock out in a dirty basement. I don't see any way of opening this door without triggering the alarm."

"Okay," Jason said.

"Then how do we open the door?" Clive wondered.

"Kicking?"

"You want to kick it open?"

"If there's anyone in there, I'm pretty sure they know we're here."

"Shouldn't we wait for the team?"

"What if someone's fleeing down an escape tunnel, or preparing something that will let the worms overrun the team?"

"What if it's twenty people waiting for the door to open so they can kick the snot out of you?"

"Then I'll run away."

"You're a lot better than me at running away."

"There's a portal right there. Actually, hold on a tick."

Jason went through the portal to where his team was still fighting the worm-host elves, but the enemy numbers were diminished as the town's population was finally nearing depletion. Standing near Neil and Belinda, Jason held his hands up over his head and chanted a spell.

As your lives were mine to reap, so your deaths are mine to harvest."

Red lights, the remnant life force of countless dead worms, shone across the charnel house of a battlefield. They then started streaming into the air, all converging on Jason who absorbed it all.

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- You have used [Blood Harvest] on multiple [World-Taker Worms].
 - Your health, mana and stamina have been replenished.
 - You have gained multiple instances of [Blood Frenzy] from [Blood Harvest].
 - 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].

- Maximum health, mana and stamina have been exceeded. Ability [Sin Eater] has temporarily raised your maximum, health, mana and stamina to accommodate. These maximums will diminish over time.
-

“Jason,” Humphrey asked. “What are you doing that you felt the need to come back and gain a massive amount of temporary life force.”

“Clive is making me kick open a magic door.”

“I am doing no such thing,” Clive denied through voice chat.

“He also said he was going to run away if something scary is in there,” Jason added.

“Can we please save the pithy banter for when we’re not fighting evil?” Rufus asked.

“Have you never seen an action movie,” Jason said.

“No!” Rufus yelled. “No, I have not!”

“For a guy ostensibly against it,” Jason told Rufus, “Your pithy banter is on point.”

“Jason...” Humphrey growled.

“Fine,” Jason said, returning through the portal. “Clive, unlock this door so I can kick it.”

Clive grumbled but put away the instruments he used to examine the door. He then took out a clear crystal rod and pointed at the door. The rod started glowing in a mix of swirling, strobing colours that slowed down their strobing over time. The colours dropped out one by one until the rod was glowing solid blue. Then the light stopped shining altogether, leaving clear crystal once again.

“I didn’t think you approved of shortcuts like unlocking rods,” Jason said.

“Taking the easy path is the wrong move when the hard one has something to teach you,” Clive said as he stepped well back, ready to jump through the portal. “I don’t have anything to learn from simple lock magic, so why waste the time? You remember that the rest of the team is still fighting, right? Now, if you insist on kicking the door open, kick away.”

“Now that I think about it,” Jason mused, “what is that alarm magic going to do? Will it be attached to a trap?”

“Probably,” Clive said. “Also, we’ve been out here talking for a while. If anyone inside didn’t know we were out here, they do now.”

“Good point. Any suggestions on how we should approach it?”

“Yes,” Clive said, eyeing the open trapdoor above them as he pulled out his wand.

“You go first.”

Jason chuckled as he strode over to the double doorway. He lifted a leg, about to kick it open when the doors were flung wide on their own. A wall of worms poured out, like

water through the sluice gate of an overflowing dam. It was swift enough that Jason was inundated, toppled over and completely buried. Clive was saved by silver-rank reflexes and agility, and his extra distance from the door. He had a scant moment to react and he used it, leaping up through the trapdoor in the ceiling.

In the building above, Clive immediately crouched to look down through the trap door. The wave of worms was flattening out but Jason was still unseen, buried beneath them.

"I think we might have a problem," Clive said through voice chat. "Jason, are you there?"

"What's the situation?" Humphrey asked.

"Jason just got buried in worms."

"How buried?" Belinda asked. "Are we talking just a lot of worms, or full bathtub?"

"More like swimming pool," Clive said. "Jason?"

There was still no response.

"We can't come down," Humphrey said. "If any more of us break off, we'll get overrun."

"I'll take a closer look and see what I can figure out," Clive said, leaning in to get a better viewing angle through the doorway below. From what he could see, it was a tunnel made of the same slate bricks as the wall into which the door was set.

A figure stepped up to the now-open door, the worms parting before it like the Red Sea. The creatures maintained a circle of clear space, not around the person but an orb she was holding out in front of her.

As the figure came fully into view, Clive spotted the wings folded on her back. It was a messenger with nut-brown skin and dark hair. Her wings were also brown, with tan speckling. Her clothes consisted of a short, loosely draped top and loose, flowing pants, both fawn-coloured. Her bare feet floated just off the floor.

The object she was holding looked like a ball of overlapping leather straps, around twice the size of a fist. The worms would not go near it and Clive got to see an unmoving Jason as the messenger drew close. The worms slithered off of his body and outside of the circle around the orb.

Jason's conjured cloak had vanished, but his conjured robes had not. Despite what was going on, Clive's analytical mind couldn't help but absently posit that while Jason himself conjured the cloak, the robes were conjured by one of his familiars. While the robes remained in place, however, it was covered in holes. The skin visible beneath each hole had a small wound mark.

Still holding the orb in one hand, the messenger conjured a spear in the other. Clive raised his wand and fired, but a wing moved out to block the beam and she brought the spear down. She was not the only one with protection, however. A nebulous eye manifested in front of Jason, then expanded into a shield that blocked the attack. Gordon manifested behind the shield with five more eyes, all of which shot beams at Jason's attacker. She blocked by wrapping her wings around in front of her, which she could barely manage in the enclosed space of the doorway. She then floated backwards, out of Clive's sight.

Clive saw that the worms flowed back from the edges of the room where they had been driven, but they now avoided Jason, just as they had done the orb. Then worms started crawling out of Jason's body, tunnelling free of his flesh. Many dug their way out through the wounds they had presumably entered by, while others poked new holes in his skin and robes with their drill-bit heads. Dozens of them were emerging from all over Jason, and Clive flinched as one pushed its way out from his eye socket, squeezing around the eyeball, like a horrifying, fleshy tear.

Then the worms that had refused to move closer to Jason started twitching and thrashing, like a rat pit after a snake was dropped in. They pushed against the walls as if trying to climb up them, or started digging into the dirt. The worms crawling out of Jason, half-emerged, flailed as they were pulled back into his body, as if plucked by the tail.

Clive spotted one worm that managed to manage to escape and start crawling away, only for a strip of red leather to extend from Jason's robe, wrap around the worm and pull it back. A leech with rings of savage lamprey teeth emerged from the same wound the worm had escaped from, and when the worm was dragged back, the leech started brutally devouring it.