

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.
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“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.