

Chapter 691

An Extremely Annoying Catalyst

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Another heavy impact rocked the shell.

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

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

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

"Uncle Jason."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Or a dimensional bag," Neil continued.

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

"Not even a regular bag."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Belinda gave Sophie a disbelieving look.

"What?" Sophie asked her.

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

"So?"

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

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

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

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

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

“What?” They asked simultaneously.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What do you want?” he asked.

“A favour.”

“What favour do you want from me?”

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

“There is more than I coming for him.”

“The rest he can handle.”

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

“It always is, and he always manages.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What's that?" Jason asked.

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

"You make me sound like a slacker."

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What do you think happened?” Rufus asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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