

## Chapter 796

### Lackeys

Farrah wore obsidian armour, covering everything but her head. She flew down to join Jason and Sophie just over the bush canopy, rubbing her temples. All around them, the bush was aflame.

"There's still plenty of them left," Farrah said. "I'll go again once I get some mana back. The lava cannon is fun, but not especially precise, and these monsters seem quite springy. I don't remember bone feasters being this quick on their feet while armoured up."

"They're not really monsters," Jason explained. "They're fakes. Also, maybe we could try an approach other than a massive lava cannon that most of them just dodge. One that doesn't involve burning my territory to the ground."

"What's the big deal?" Farrah asked. "I bet that mountain has whatever passes for a central base in it. No fire's getting in there. Did you carve it into the shape of your own head?"

"The big deal," Jason said, "is that on the other side of this mountain is a replica of Casselton Beach, which a bushfire will rip through. Including the ice cream shop."

"What?" Farrah yelped. "Okay, hold on. There's a fire and we need to stop it. This is fine, it's all going to be fine. Right, I can absorb fire to get mana back. I just have to absorb all the fire and everything will be okay. You two can deal with the monsters."

She shot off towards the nearest batch of flames.

Jason shook his head and turned to Sophie.

"Shall we?" he asked, pointing down into the bushland and the anomalies within.

"Let's," she said and let herself fall.

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Korinne Pescos frantically scrambled between massive rocks in the bottom of the vast desert canyon. She stopped, pressing her back against the stone left scorching hot by the unyielding sun. She glanced up at the massive crystal jutting from the rock she was hiding behind. The powerful alien aura it pulsed out was masking her presence from her gold-rank pursuer.

The crystal was one of many, blanketing the canyon that was kilometres across and dozens of kilometres long. The clashing auras they produced left her with a splitting headache but she was grateful for them nonetheless. The Undeath priest hunting her could not sense her any more than she could him, and there were plenty of rocks, gullies and overhangs to hide her.

She'd been so happy in the beginning. Of all the places she could have been dropped in the transformation zone, she ran into two of her team members almost immediately. Then they had met the priest, and now the animated bodies of Jetta and Polix were chasing her through the canyon. They were trying to flush her out like hunting hounds while she had to flee, even as she mourned them.

The priest was in no rush, loudly and gleefully taunting her. He had the power and was making a game of it. He could track her down and make short work of her if he tried but, instead, teased her like a cat with a mouse. Korinne knew it was only a matter of time until he got bored or she made a lethal mistake. She could feel the despair clawing at her like an animal, stalking around in the shattered remains of her hope.

Suddenly she felt a surge of power that somehow cut through the pervasive aura of the crystals. Almost the moment she felt it there was a massive crash that thundered in her ears and shook the ground. Dust flooded the canyon like a tidal wave, washing past her and cutting off her vision.

She came out from her hiding place, navigating carefully with her hands held out in front of her. All she could see was dust and an occasional golden flash in the distance. A ringing sound of hammering metal rang out like a blacksmith working a piece of iron.

Korinne flinched back when she almost stumbled into Jetta. Her friend, now a slack-jawed corpse, showed no reaction to Korinne and stood still as a mannequin. She continued towards the sound, barely caring if the commotion was made by enemy or ally. Finally, she encountered two figures walking through the dust cloud, their blurry shapes resolving into people she recognised.

One was the leonid, Gareth Xandier, but larger than she remembered by some two feet. His eyes blazed with golden light and she could sense his aura when she concentrated on it, even through the interference of the crystals. He was gold-rank despite having been silver when she had seen him just hours previous. The man walking alongside him was Rufus Remore, looking unchanged. Korinne quickly approached them, looking up at the leonid.

"The priest?" she asked. Dust crawled into her mouth, leaving it dry and chalky.

"Dealt with," Gary told her.

"What happened to you?"

"Cup of Heroes."

"Oh. I'm sorry. How long do you have?"

"In this place? As long as we're here. Perhaps another three hours after we leave."

"You get to keep the power that long?" she asked.

“The gods cannot reach us here. There is nowhere for the power to return to, so it does not try.”

Rufus, who had remained silent, walked past her to look at Jetta’s unmoving body. The dust was beginning to settle, increasing visibility distance. Rufus’ expression turned dark as he asked Korinne a question.

“Isn’t this—”

“My team member, yes,” Korinne told him. “There’s another one out there somewhere. I suppose the dust will have to clear before we find him.”

“Would you like me to put them to rest?” Rufus asked.

“No,” Korinne said. “I couldn’t save them, but at least I can do this.”

Tears cut through the dust caking her face as she marched grimly towards Jetta. Rufus glanced at Gary but said nothing.

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The messengers were in a state of confusion. Their last clear memories were of initiating the ritual that would convert the natural array into a soul forge. After that was an incoherent mess of images and sensations that could only be called memories by the most generous definition.

Now that the external influence of the corrupted messenger tree had been purged, they were trying to put together the pieces of what had happened. They needed to know where they were, what their circumstances were and what to do about it. They had some information from the system message, Jason's power having imprinted elements of his system interface on the entire zone. The messengers, however, lacked critical elements of context.

There were two gold-ranked and what they believed were five silver-ranked messengers. Belinda wasn’t sure how many of the messengers had been overtaken by the elemental tree, rather than spawned from it, but she guessed this was a good percentage of those that survived. The gold-rankers seemed well-versed in magical theory which made sense. These were the ones sent to transform the natural array into a soul forge. Given that they had failed spectacularly, their competence in employing that theory was up in the air.

The messengers were gathered atop the ruins of a stone ziggurat, one of many ruins poking out from the canopy of a sprawling jungle. Belinda wasn’t sure about the size of most territories, but this one was enormous. There were plateaued mountains in one direction, some hundred kilometres away. In the opposite direction, that land was mostly flat to the horizon, blanketed in lush green jungle. The air was hot and wet, the sun

scathing in a clear sky. Insects buzzed around but were not fool enough to approach such powerful auras.

They had all been dumped in the transformation zone separately, wiping out undead and living anomalies until they found one another. The anomalies took the form of jungle beasts, from lizards and cats to clouds of insects and lurking bog monsters. Belinda had been doubly lucky, first in finding an isolated silver-rank messenger. The others were too distant to sense Belinda killing her and sinking her to the bottom of a swamp. A concealment and preservation ritual would prevent the corpse from turning to rainbow smoke too quickly, and make her hard to find. It would take a gold-ranker making a concerted search at relatively close range to find it.

Belinda's other lucky break was that the messengers were isolated from their astral king. This meant that they could not rely on that connection to identify an outsider in their midst. She hadn't been certain of that point until she'd already infiltrated the group, but their conversation quickly confirmed it.

Infiltrating the messenger group had been a gamble, but several key things had gone her way. Being isolated from their astral king was one, and their confusion another. She had no idea of the personality of the messenger she had replaced but generic arrogant prick seemed a safe bet. With all of the messengers out of sorts from their ordeal, being at least somewhat out of character would fit right in.

The gold-rankers had managed to scavenge enough materials for a basic ritual to assess their environment. Messenger bodies were highly magical and their feathers could stand in for various materials. Their blood likewise made good material to draw out the lines and sigils. Naturally, one of the silver-rankers was 'volunteered' to supply them, the gold-rankers unwilling to pluck their own feathers.

Belinda got lucky that they didn't pick her, as her shape-shifting power would not imbue her body with the intrinsic magic of the messengers. Just maintaining a messenger-like aura was tricky enough; the strength and nature her aura seemed to have would easily crack under scrutiny.

Along with messenger body parts, they spread out to gather material from the jungle around them. Plants and rocks with high concentrations of magic weren't too hard to find and they gathered the required material in a few hours. Belinda's knowledge would have allowed her to go faster, but she had quickly realised that the silver-rankers were not meant to have a lot of magical knowledge. That was for the gold-rankers while the rest of them were merely lackeys.

Belinda hadn't figured out the name of her identity yet. Unless someone else used it, she might have to take a risk to get it. If someone used it and she didn't answer, not realising they were speaking to her, that could be the end. It was a dangerous contradiction that could help or ruin her, depending on how it went. Her best bet was to try and get someone to use it, but that held risks in itself.

The gold-rank messengers proved that they were quite good at not just using magic but interpreting the results, despite their failure with the natural array. As an enthusiast of improvised magic herself, Belinda learned a lot from the process of the messengers cobbling together their ritual. She hoped that studying the messengers and their magic would give her a critical chance down the line.

The ritual itself was not much to look at, just the gold rankers floating in the air above the ritual circle. Afterwards, they discussed what the ritual had shown them, along with their physical exploration of the zone and the scattered memories from their time under the messenger tree's control.

Messenger arrogance helped Belinda out as they did not bother with the silver-rankers at all during this process. The gold-rankers decided that only their insights and recollections were valuable, saving Belinda from the need to invent some.

The messengers demonstrated some impressive deductive reasoning, grasping the main points of their circumstances. They didn't have everything, but put together more than she expected, relative to what she and the other expedition members had been told by Jason.

Galis Jay Vahal was one of the gold-rankers, the other being named Kol Kelis Vel.

"In short," Galis said, "we need to claim and unify these territories before anyone else in here. If that means eliminating any opposition we encounter then all the better. We do not know everything yet, so we can extract answers from them before we let them die."

"Should we?" one of the silver-rankers asked. "Haven't we been tainted by what happened to us? Removed from the pure messenger ideal? Perhaps we should destroy ourselves, rather than return to Vesta Carmis Zell corrupted."

"Don't be an idiot," Belinda snapped, hoping this was her moment. "If the gold-rankers thought that, they would have destroyed us already. We need to listen to their words and obey their commands. Thinking for yourself will get you nowhere. Obviously."

Galis looked to Belinda with approval, then at the other messenger.

"Relia Vin Vala is correct," he said. "Do not presume that your understanding of anything is greater than ours, Cas Vin Baral. You should thank Relia Vin Vala as her wisdom has saved you from a more violent education at my hands."

The look Cas Vin Baral gave Belinda was not one of gratitude. She had made an enemy, but getting her name and ingratiating herself with the gold-rankers had been worth it. It was a good beginning.

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Neil's early days as an adventurer had been a mixed bag. Assigned as a lackey to Thadwick Mercer through family obligation, dealing with a fool whose arrogance and incompetence only escalated over time had been a miserable experience. Outside of Thadwick himself, however, things had been good.

The Mercer family seemed to understand exactly what they had piled onto Neil and went out of their way to compensate. From the day his training began, years before absorbing his essences, the Mercer family had given him training, facilities and resources that only the Gellers could match.

Whether all that was from guilt or a desire to give Thadwick the best companions, Neil still didn't know. If it came down to Thadwick's mother, he would put faith in her good intentions. But the Mercer family was large and Thadwick was raised primarily by his father. In his good intentions, Neil had no faith at all.

Other aspects of Neil's early years made life with Thadwick bearable. He was another face in the crowd when it came to being an admirer of Thadwick's sister, Cassandra, but had more proximity than most. His early hostility to Jason had not come from any loyalty to Thadwick but outrage that Cassandra had chosen Jason, of all people. He would eventually — and grudgingly — come to recognise that Jason wasn't without virtue, but remained convinced that Jason had unscrupulously seduced her through otherworldly culinary delights.

More than any of that, what had gotten Neil through working with Thadwick was the third member of their team, Dustin Kettering. Dustin was in the same position as Neil, forced to train and work with Thadwick through the obligation of his family to the Mercers. Neil and Dustin, two people in the same circumstance, with the same problems, unsurprisingly built up a camaraderie.

Dustin had joined Rick's team, not long after Neil had joined Jason and Humphrey. Like Neil and Dustin, Rick's group were struggling with the repercussions of the disastrous expedition out of Greenstone. Thadwick and Rick's party member, Jonas, had both been captured by the Builder cult and implanted with star seeds, leading to unpleasant ends for both. Dustin might not have cared for Thadwick, but there was an understanding that allowed him to find a place with Rick and his teammates.

Both Neil and Dustin had been lost after Thadwick had gone completely off the rails. Neil had been lured into Jason's team, mostly by the assurances of Humphrey's mother. He still might have refused because of Jason himself if Jason hadn't paid Neil a visit. Jason's approach of honesty had made Neil realise that Jason would be an annoyance, but one he could live with. Respect had taken quite a bit longer and a large number of sandwiches, reaffirming Neil's suspicions about Jason and Cassandra.

When Neil and Dustin found themselves dropped in the same territory, it made for a welcome reunion. It also gave them a frontline and healer combination. They discussed this as they walked beside a canal in a city with looming gothic architecture.

"We need some damage dealers," Dustin said.

"Sure, but that can be anyone," Neil said dismissively. "Damage dealers get all the glory, but it's people like you and me that determine victory and defeat. We just need to recruit the first idiot we encounter who can lob a firebolt or shoot an arrow. I'd even be willing to accept an affliction specialist, so long as he brings snacks."