

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."