

## Chapter 225

### Running Towards Something

Clive tossed out some glow stones that floated up into the darkness, illuminating the huge figure that occupied the interior of the tower.

“A giant statue?” Neil postulated.

“Not a statue,” Clive said. “There are articulation points on the ankles and knees. I can’t see clearly from down here, but likely all the other joints, as well. This is some kind of golem. A ridiculously enormous golem.

The air inside the tower was cold and clammy. Jason stepped forward and touched a hand to the chilly metal foot.

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- ??? (world engineer).
  - Construct (diamond rank).
  
  - ???.
  - ???.
  - ???.
  - ???.
  - ???.
  - ???.
  - ???.
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Clive quickly followed to see the same message, the others doing the same. All but Sophie, who lacked enhanced magical senses, could sense an incredible but dormant power within.

“What’s a world engineer?” Neil asked.

“I have no idea,” Clive said.

“I suspect it’s best for everyone if none of us ever find out,” Neil said. “I don’t know about you, but I’m getting a very Builder feeling off of this thing.”

“You can sense it too?” Jason asked.

“What?” Neil asked. “No, I just meant, you know, world engineer, giant construct. It kind of screams ‘Builder’ right?”

“I can feel an echo of the Builder in this thing’s power,” Jason said. “This belongs to it.”

“Then why did the Order of the Reaper have it?” Humphrey asked.

“Shade?” Jason asked.

“I do not know,” Shade said. “The existence of these constructs was unknown to me.”

“It seems this place has more secrets than anyone realised,” Humphrey said.

“We thought they were just trying to take the astral space,” Clive said. “Are these things the true goal?”

“Maybe it’s both,” Jason said. “The Builder wants these back, which is what it’ll get if it claims this astral space.”

“It doesn’t matter what the Builder wants,” Sophie said. “It doesn’t change what we want. We’re here to stop the cultists, whatever they’re up to.”

“Exactly,” Humphrey said. “The important part of this discovery is to figure out how it helps us.”

“I’m not sure it does,” Clive said. “I don’t have the resources, or frankly the knowledge to begin unravelling what this thing is, what it’s for or what it’s doing here.”

“It at least tells us what to do next, right?” Sophie asked. “Even if we don’t know exactly what they’re up to, it’s going to involve these towers. We already thought that, and this just makes it all the more evident.”

“She’s right,” Humphrey agreed. “Our first move should be to make our way around the outskirts of the city and check out all of these towers. The cultists may well be set up at one of them.”

“We can also see if all the towers hold one of these things,” Clive said.

“Do we know how many towers there are?” Neil asked.

“Twelve,” Clive said. “Each around eight kilometres apart.”

“Alright, Clive, see if you can’t seal this thing back up and we’ll leave.”

Clive called back the glow stones he had sent floating up into the tower and the team left. Once he removed the magical diagram he had used to open it, the doorway closed again, leaving no trace it was ever there.

“I know the original idea was to make our way from tower to tower on foot,” Belinda said, “but from the top of these towers we can see some of the others. Should we be portalling or teleporting or whatever?”

Jason was not the only member of the team to unlock a mass-transit power with a bronze-rank ability. Clive could open a portal, while Humphrey could now teleport people as a group. Their carry capacity and cooldown for each was the same as Jason’s gate portal.

“We want to come at each tower as quietly as we can,” Humphrey said. “Teleporting into the middle of eight bronze-rankers is a good way to get killed. We should stick with going on foot and have Jason scout it out.”

Jason's stealth abilities had become quite formidable by the time all his powers were awakened. His cloak helped him blend into shadows and he received further boosts from his familiars, Shade and Gordon. For each body subsumed into Jason's shadow, Shade could mask one giveaway element like scent, heat or even muffle Jason's movements against sensitive ears. While Gordon was subsumed into Jason's aura, Jason's ability to retract it completely was enhanced. Combined with Jason's current aura strength, even most bronze-rankers would be unable to sense it.

They set out from the tower, in the direction of the next. The shoreline was made up of large rocks that were not easily navigable, so they followed the overgrown streets. Even then, the terrain was not easy going. They could have moved faster, after all the mobility training they had done, but Humphrey insisted on slow but steady. They were expecting monsters and worse, and he didn't want them stumbling into too much danger at once.

Sophie ranged ahead as two of Shade's three bodies watched their flanks, while the last took its place as Jason's shadow. Jason's tactical map and voice communication made sure everyone could be alerted the moment a threat appeared.

Sophie was not a stealthy scout like Jason but her mobility was incomparable. Whether running up the sides of buildings or sailing between them, she was the embodiment of agility and grace. Sometimes she would blast herself into the air with a burst of wind and glide above them, using further bursts to throw herself higher. In this way, she could effectively fly, scouting ahead with the vantage that offered. She was also seemingly inexhaustible. Her celestine nature reduced the ongoing mana costs of powers, while her avatar of speed power reduced those costs even further.

"She's really getting a handle of her powers," Jason said, looking up in admiration. "She's like a bird on the wing."

"They used to call her the Nightingale, in the fighting pits," Belinda said. "If only they could see her now."

They had a soul compass that would point to the closest thing with a soul, except for themselves, who had been filtered out. That meant cultists or flesh abominations, which could very well be the same thing. It would not forewarn them of monsters, however.

They had already determined a policy of how to handle monster encounters. To begin with, they would fight anything they didn't recognise all together, even if it was iron rank. Once they had an idea of what they were up against, they would start sending out their members who could best handle, or best learn from any given encounter.

The astral space's magical saturation promised monsters, which it quickly delivered. It was only eight or so kilometres from one tower to the next, yet they had two monster

encounters on the way. The first was a pair of bronze-rank monsters that were quite tough, but no match for the team's rapidly growing capabilities. The next was a cluster of bark lurkers, a type of iron-rank monster commonly seen in the delta. It was normally a solitary creature, but they encountered a half-dozen, all at once. They were very hardy creatures and proved more difficult to deal with than the two bronze-rank ones.

They sat around on strewn, moss-covered rubble, resting after the fight.

"Looks like we might be fighting all together for a bit," Neil said. "Those extra numbers are rough."

"That's the magical saturation at work," Clive said. "The weaker the monster, the more of them we can expect to see."

"What about something that already travels in packs?" Neil said. "Will there be a whole army of them?"

"Probably," Clive said.

"Jason fought a bark lurker during our field assessment," Humphrey said.

"Back then, my afflictions were the best way to handle them," Jason said. "Your special attacks seem to be doing just fine, now."

"I envy those high damage attacks," Sophie said.

"I like your retaliation power," Humphrey told her. "You stopped that thing like it had run into a cliff face."

Bark lurkers were largely slow, but would make charging rush attacks. One of them tried to use it on Sophie, to unfortunate effect. Her balance essence ability, moment of oneness, could absorb attacks for a brief moment, then return their power back on an enemy. She had jammed her fingers into a gap between the thick carapace plates of the bark lurker and unleashed the full power of its own charge onto it.

"I'm not sure it was as harsh as you say," Humphrey told Neil. "We will need to be pushed further than these fights did, if we want to cross that line into bronze," Humphrey said.

"Speak for yourself," Belinda said. "I found those plenty rough enough."

"I'm sorry," Humphrey said to her. "I know this will be harder on you than any of us. We all awakened our powers more slowly than you, and worked our way up through easier fights than you have and will continue to face. All the more, since your powers are a lot more sophisticated than a set like mine."

The others nodded.

"You've had it harder than all of us," Jason said. "You went out on a road contract before you were even a member of the Adventure Society. It must be fairly overwhelming."

“It’s been a lot of changes,” Belinda acknowledged, then shared a look with Sophie, before turning her gaze back to the team. “We know what it’s like to be running on a knife edge, though. At least now, we’re running towards something, instead of away.”

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Between rough terrain and monster fights, it took the team hours to close the distance to the second tower

They reached the second tower, finding it with no more signs of cultist activity than the first. Clive, now knowing what to look for, was able to find the hidden door quite quickly, revealing another enormous golem.

The sun was descending over the city and it was unlikely they would make the next tower before dark without picking up the pace.

While the others were at the base of the tower as Clive closed the door back up, Jason and Humphrey made their way to the top, looking out to the next tower.

“What do you think?” Humphrey asked. “Do we camp here, or push it?”

“Neither,” Jason said. “We shouldn’t camp near the towers. The cultists probably don’t know we’re here but let’s not make it easy for them, just in case. We pick somewhere more hidden and defensible between here and the next tower.”

“Alright,” Humphrey agreed.

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Jason set up his cloud house. Choosing the adaptive version, it took on the appearance of an overgrown stone building, blending perfectly into the surroundings.

The next morning, Humphrey roused the team not to press on, but for the day’s training routine.

The training took up a solid chunk of the morning, going from physical training to movement training to combat training to mental training. They had brought along the set of weights Jason had inherited from Farrah, which were simple but would serve them through bronze rank.

“We’re in a strange dimension full of monsters and treasure,” Neil’s complained, “and I’m here doing arm curls?”

“The best are the best because they don’t slack off,” Humphrey told him.

“Do I have to be the best?” Neil asked. “Couldn’t I just be pretty good, but with a sexy wife?”

Sophie led the way with mobility training, the strange terrain actually making for a good training ground. Jason guided the team through meditation, aura training and the mental exercises that Farrah had taught to him.

They kept up the slow but steady pace, monster after monster and tower after tower, with no sign of the cultists. They would check two or three new towers each day, depending on the terrain and how many monsters they encountered. Each tower seemed to have one of the huge golems inside.

They couldn't travel for more than a few hours without encountering monsters. Of a night they would retire to the cloud house, a much more luxurious accommodation than what they had for the Reaper trials. That was still only a limited respite, as each night, some magically-sensitive monster would find the house and attack it.

What limited damage they were able to do before the team emerged to handle the problem, the house would repair easily. It did mean Jason needed to replenish the magic expended to do so, by dropping spirit coins into the cloud flask as if it were a slot machine. The raw magic of the coins was exactly what the house needed to reconstitute any damage.

They were frugal with their supplies. They did not use crystal wash, instead showing off what were inevitably blood and gore-caked bodies in the cloud house showers every evening. Food was in short supply, the team having allocated the room in their personal storage spaces and dimensional bags for critical adventuring supplies. They sustained themselves on spirit coins, Jason hoarding his small stock of actual food to celebrate rank-ups, when they eventually came.

"At this point, it seems like they haven't set up around one of the towers," Humphrey said on their fourth night in the city, as the team was sitting in the lounge of the cloud house.

"Where do we check next, then?" Neil asked. "The centre of the city, where the last trials were?"

"It's as good a place as any," Humphrey said. "What can we expect to find there, Shade?"

"The trials tower should be quite thoroughly destroyed by now," Shade said. "The magic maintaining the tower's integrity was withdrawn with the completion of the trials. Without control over the dimensional spaces within, they most likely devoured themselves and the bulk of the tower with them. There may be some things of value in what remains. It is possible that treasures unclaimed during the trials were not annihilated and could still be waiting to be excavated."

"Now we're talking," Neil said. "Hidden secrets, buried treasure. Now, that's an adventure."

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The soul compass was not a flat object, but spherical, with the needle, floating magically within. The needle moved on a central pivot point, like a regular compass, but could also indicate verticality. Its moved slowly, suggesting that the closest soul was still some distance away.

“I think it’s safe to say that the cultists are deeper into the city,” Clive said.

“We’ll still check the last two towers today, just in case,” Humphrey said. “Tomorrow, we head for the centre.”

“And the loot,” Neil added.

They had already encountered some treasure, in the form of three awakening stones they had picked up along the way. They hadn’t been looking, but with so many enhanced magical senses on the team, they were easy to find by simple proximity.

Although the flesh abominations and cultists remained distant, the monsters were still attacking with enthusiasm. The team was reminded that those were not the only threats the astral space had to offer when Sophie dropped lightly to the ground in front of them.

“Vorger,” she warned. “Lots of them. It was like a cloud bank moving in.”

Jason used the lightness of his cloak and the leaping power of his magical boots to reach the top of a building in a few easy jumps. He looked out at the incorporeal, ghost-like astral creatures bearing down on them as the team made preparations below. They drew closer and closer as he stood and watched, until it was like a wall of whiteness moving through the sky.

Jason’s aura erupted out of him like a tsunami, washing over the vorger. The astral beings were themselves like ragged scraps of soul, so he made a soul attack against them. There was a piercing shriek of noise and a horrible tearing sound, and then the vorger were gone, as if they had never existed at all.