

Chapter 659

Evil Lair

Jason emerged from his soul space, cloak and hood back in place. In the tunnel beneath the town, Clive was looking at the empty space where the messenger had died. There was no visible trace after Jason's execute spell left not so much as a single drop of blood. Instead, there was a pile of dirty clothes and the orb she had used to avoid the worms. Clive was searching her clothes for anything else left behind, but stood up on Jason's return.

"You handled that with unexpected ease," Clive said. "I expected more from the messengers."

"It didn't feel so easy. I was impaled a lot of times. There was a spear inside my head and it exploded."

"Now that our bodies are generalised magical flesh, your ability to infuse yours with additional life force is more useful. You can shrug off formidable injury."

"Exactly. That would have been rough if I hadn't topped up before coming down here. Also, I think she was as weak a messenger as we can expect to face," Jason said. "The one Shade and I spied on was stronger, even within the same rank. And she didn't lose because of a lack in power. She lost because of a weak mentality."

"You played on the messenger superiority fixation," Clive said. "Used the various quirks you possess to shake her."

"That will only work on the weak-minded ones," Jason said. "I sensed a vulnerability in her emotions and exploited it. She was lesser amongst her kind, so she already had a subconscious inferiority complex. Most won't break as easily, and I won't often get the chance to try."

"So you saw a weakness and preyed on it," Clive said. "How much of what you said to her did you mean?"

"I played up the melodrama, but it all came from somewhere. I may have embellished, but I didn't lie."

"Jason, are you alright?"

"I'm fine."

"You didn't sound fine. You sounded ready to twist the heads off puppies and drink their insides."

“I just told you about the melodrama. I’m okay, Clive, really. I’ve put the evil hat away for now, and my familiars helped me stay balanced. I’m about as good as you could ask for, given the horrors that have taken place in this town. I’m more worried about you.”

“Me?”

“Clive, the entire population of this town were killed and turned into meat puppets for alien worms. It won’t be the only town like this, either. I don’t know how much you’ve sensed about what was happening up there while we were down here, the team cleared out all the hosts. I imagine that with everything going on down here, you subconsciously suppressed your sense of smell.”

Clive concentrated on his olfactory senses, realising that Jason was right. His nose was immediately choked with the cloying stench of death, drifting down from above. His tongue was coated in the coppery taste of blood and he almost gagged. It was not a physiological reaction but a mental one, driven by disgust. His supernatural senses expanded, filling him in on the killing field that had once been a town.

As shaken as Clive was, he had only seen the early stages of the fight. He could feel the team’s unstable emotions, ranging from numb horror through grim determination to burning rage. Suddenly Jason breaking the will of the messenger responsible before killing her did not seem like such an overreaction.

“The messenger didn’t go up in rainbow smoke,” Jason said. Clive knew his friend was only trying to distract him, but welcomed it.

“Refined magic in their bodies,” Clive explained. “I’m more interested in the red haze that was in their death smoke.”

“Remnant life force,” Jason said. “Normally transcendent damage would wipe that out when the body is completely eradicated, but the life of messengers is not just physical. It’s tenacious, which is why I had to fight her soul down to take it. Resurrection magic doesn’t work on messengers. Or anyone like them.”

“Like you?”

“Yeah. But I have my own thing going on.”

“Is that what that bird form your cloak took on was? That looked like a star phoenix.”

“You know star phoenixes?”

“They’re a symbol commonly associated with the Celestial Book.”

“I forgot you were in the bag for a great astral being. Didn’t really know what that meant when you told me. You’re not in a cult or an order or something, are you?”

“No. Those of us that venerate the Celestial Book maintain a loose network, with ties to the Magic Society and the Church of Knowledge. I haven’t been keeping in touch very often since the Magic Society and I parted ways. They’d be very interested in you.”

“There’s a little too much of that going around,” Jason said. “Thus, the false identity.”

“You aren’t hiding your real one very well.”

“If the fake story falls apart, then fine,” Jason said. “These may be the only real adventuring years I have. I’m not going to waste them pretending.”

“What do you mean, the only real adventuring years?”

“I don’t know what Dawn told you about what’s coming,” Jason said. “She doesn’t want me to ask, so I won’t. But something’s waiting for me down the road, Clive, and it’s not good. Whatever it is.”

“I’m not meant to talk about it,” Clive said. “But Dawn excluded me when she talked to the others. I don’t know why.”

“Because she knew that you’d figure out something you shouldn’t. Not yet, at least.”

“It’s not like you to accept secrets being held over your fate.”

“I trust Dawn. Not her boss, but her.”

Jason turned to look down the tunnel, but instead of heading in reached out to Humphrey through voice chat.

“You need us to come up?”

“You’re alive, then,” Rufus said. “We were sensing the fight down there.”

“I told you he’d be fine,” Neil said. “Probably got another stupid power out of it.”

“More like a new way to use an old one,” Jason said.

“Wait, you actually did?” Neil exclaimed. “That is a huge pile of—”

“What about the messenger?” Humphrey asked. “Was that her dying we sensed?”

“Yeah,” Jason said.

“Felt like she went out rough,” Sophie said. “Good.”

“We’re mopping up out here,” Rufus said. “We’re definitely not done but it’s finally looking like the town is running out of worms hosts. I don’t think we need the help.”

“We can’t spare anyone, but I don’t think we need the help,” Humphrey said. “Explore the hidden area and see if there’s anything else we need to deal with.”

Jason and Clive shared a grim look. While they both hoped to find little downstairs, they feared encountering fresh horrors.

“Let’s go,” Jason said. “I have a bad feeling that the other adventuring teams are finding much the same right now, all across the region.”

“Will that be alright with just the two of us? At the very least, a lot of worms escaped down there.”

“Any that haven’t been eaten yet will be too scared of Colin to come for me,” Jason assured him. “And as for you...”

Jason looked at the messenger’s clothes, piled at Clive’s feet with the orb on top of them. Using his aura, Jason floated it up in front of Clive.

“...that should keep you safe.”

Clive reached out and took the ball.

“Are you worried about how much you’re like them?” he asked.

“I can’t change it, so there’s no point worrying about it,” Jason said. “I’m trying to make that my new personal philosophy. See if I can’t cut back on the brooding.”

Jason flashed Clive a smile but it wasn’t quite right. They could both still smell the blood and death in the air. Clive nodded at him and they set off down the brick tunnel.

“If being like the messengers gives me something I can use,” Jason said, “I’m going to use it. So long as I don’t end up hurting people the way they do.”

“I don’t think it’s their powers,” Clive said as they reached the top of the stairs and peered down. “I think they just have a culture of being detestable scum.”

The large slate bricks from which the hidden basement was built continued down the stairs and into a wide chamber lit by glow stones in a ceiling that stood two storeys high, with catwalks roaming around the upper level. Arched doorways led into side chambers, but the main chamber itself had plenty to look at. Clive knew a magical workshop when he saw one, with workbenches, freestanding magical tools and magically driven vents in the ceiling and walls. Most prominent were massive vats, some empty and some teeming with worms swimming in sickly yellow fluid.

Even at a glance, it was clear that this was the centre in which the worms had been bred, and not just because of the worms crawling around, being hunted and devoured by Colin. The stairs were slick with ichor from where worms had already met their end.

As they descended, the spotted four glass cylinders that had been obscured by the vats from their initial vantage. These were just the right size to hold people, and three of the vats had elves inside. They extended their senses, quickly realising that the occupants were dead.

They moved towards the centre of the chamber, which had an open workspace with long, clean tables. Worms writhed around the room with leeches in pursuit, but they avoided Jason and the orb in Clive’s hand.

“What do you think?” Jason asked, standing in the middle of the chamber. “My magical studies were all astral magic, not whatever passes for biological sciences. I know an evil lair when I see one, though. Catwalks over monster breeding vats are bit of a giveaway.”

Clive looked at the catwalks, which had no ladders or stairs to reach them. He guessed that the messenger, who could float around everywhere, had only used them to rest objects on while working. This was reinforced by the crates on them that he guessed were filled with whatever served as nutrient supply for the vats. He desperately hoped it wasn't chunks of people.

“Am I imagining it,” Jason asked, “or do the messengers have much better aura shielding magic than us? My senses can't get out of here any more than they could get in.”

“The party interface is still active,” Clive observed. “It can't be a complete seal. But if you can't extend your senses past these walls, that's probably the case. Securing an area against perception requires a lot of infrastructure and special materials, at least by any magic we know. I'm guessing this place just has ritual circles in place behind these slate tile walls.”

Clive's senses weren't as strong as Jason's but his perception power excelled at recognising and analysing in-place magical effects, like rituals. That allowed him to notice things that even Jason's perception missed.

“There's something going on with that section of wall,” he said, pointing. “Also, in the floor, in the middle of the room. You want to take the floor while I look at the wall?”

“Belinda will be of more use to you than me,” Jason said. “I'll swap out with her.”

He opened the voice chat to the rest of the team again. “How is it going up there?”

“We think we've just about run out of townsfolk,” Humphrey said in a haunted voice. “It's... it's bad up here.”

“I know,” Jason said softly. “I'm sorry you had to go through that.”

His own voice was haunted by the thousands of dead he'd been unable to save in Broken Hill and Makassar. Just as he'd had to fight the victims after they were brought back to life, Humphrey and the team had cut down all the townsfolk reduced to hosts for the worms.

“We're going to get the messengers back for this,” Sophie snarled. “They think they can just use people however they want.”

“Getting the messengers back doesn't matter,” Humphrey said. “What's important is stopping them from doing this again. But if that means killing them all, then that can't be helped.”

Jason couldn't think of anything that marked the severity of what the team had been through more than a bloodthirsty Humphrey. Even under the current circumstances, it came as a shock.

"I'll come up, and swap out with Lindy," Jason said. "We've found some kind of magic workshop, so she'll be more use than I am down here."

He extended his senses through the room, determining that few of the worms remained. Colin, on the other hand, was growing close his maximum potential biomass again.

"Colin, leave enough to clean up the last worms and have the rest follow me. Gather yourself together so we can go outside."

All around the room, leeches melted into pools of blood. Wet strips of ragged bandage shot out of them, tangling together at the bottom of the stairs. The blood pools flowed quickly along the bandages, swiftly coagulating into Colin's blood clone form. It followed Jason up the stairs.