

Chapter 114: Climbing Mountains

Jason walked through the halls of the cloud palace. Far from just white cloud-stuff, the walls, floors and ceilings were marked-out in sunset shades of rich blues, purples, oranges and golds. In some areas it was startlingly vibrant; in others, soft and subdued. Everything glowed with its own light, which Emir had told Jason was absorbed sunlight the palace could store-up and distribute as needed. The floors underfoot had a springiness that was still very stable, as if a very sensible engineer had been forced to design a bouncy castle. The total effect was like walking through a fairy tale.

A full wing of the cloud palace was dedicated to guest suites and Jason walked from his own to that in which Emir had placed Belinda and Sophie. The wide door was white, with the edges marked out in blue. Next to it was a small, circular patch of gold in the wall, which he pressed a finger into. It felt like pressing into a soft, downy doona.

He heard a pleasant chime from the other side of the door, like tinkling water. A few moments later, the door became translucent, revealing Sophie standing on the other side. She was wearing dark, practical clothing, with her entire posture screaming the opposite of welcome.

“You’ll want to come in then,” she said, her tone trying to convince him otherwise.

“It’s time we had a talk,” Jason said, “but we don’t have to do it here. The palace is full of places for a nice chat.”

“It’ll be nice, will it?”

“Probably not, now you ask. I brought sandwiches if that helps.”

Sophie jerked her head in a reluctant invitation and Jason walked inside. Jason’s suite was larger than any place Jason had ever lived in and Belinda and Sophie were occupying one that seemed very similar.

“Terrace,” she directed him, although not heading that way herself.

He could see the terrace through the walls, which had their opacity shifted to the point of being invisible air. The mist wall tussled Jason’s hair as he walked through it.

“That’s indoor/outdoor living,” he murmured to himself as he walked over to the terrace furniture. He set out a tray of sandwiches, plates, glasses and a pitcher of blended fruit drink from his inventory before sitting down.

Belinda and Sophie came out just as he was pouring drinks. Belinda was dressed in light, summery clothes, of loose shirt, pants and sandals, in the colourful Greenstone style.

She immediately sat down and grabbed a sandwich. Sophie didn't reach for the food, looking at it with suspicion.

"Is this bread from Pantero's?" Belinda asked after swallowing her first bite. Pantero's was a bakery in Old City and had the best bread Jason had found in the city.

"It is," he said brightly. "My friend Beth told me about it. They've been operating there for an incredibly long time. Her grandmother used to go there as a girl when their family owned that whole part of the city."

"You're talking about the Cavendish family?"

"That's them."

"Didn't they leave the Cavendish district the better part of two centuries ago?"

"Something like that," Jason said. "That's the adventuring life, I suppose. You live long enough to see history for yourself."

The easy smile fell from his face.

"If it doesn't get you killed first," he added darkly, clearly talking to himself.

"Did something happen when you went away?" Belinda asked.

"A friend of mine died," he said.

"A close friend?"

"As close as I have in this world. She taught me so much about being an adventurer."

"She taught you to fight?" Sophie asked.

"No, that was Rufus. He taught me to fight like an adventurer. Farrah taught me to live like one."

He smiled, sadly.

"She'd call me out when I started talking out my backside. Which you may come to find is pretty often."

He brushed the back of his hand over his eyes and gave them a grin that was only a little forced.

"None of that matters to you, though," he told them. "You have your own troubles to deal with, which is why I'm here."

"I thought your clever plan collapsed in a heap," Sophie said.

"It did," Jason said, "but times, as the song goes, are a-changing."

"What song?"

"Doesn't matter," Jason said, waving a dismissive hand. "As it stands, I see this going one of four ways. The pair of you will have to choose between them."

"And if we don't like your options?" Sophie asked.

“That would be option one,” Jason said. “You put me and my schemes behind you, which is reasonable, given how they’ve gone thus far. You walk out of the cloud palace and seize your own fate. Option two is similar, but more appealing, I think. You still walk away, but we send you far from here first. Our host has someone that can send you places so far from here it’s not worth the effort of looking for you.”

“A teleporting power,” Sophie said.

“She opens portals, which is how we came and went just recently. Her name is Hester, and she seems quite nice. You can talk to her to pick out a destination, then we send you off. We’ll send you off with a fist full of cash but that is all you will have, aside from each other. I imagine a couple of resourceful women like yourselves will have no trouble starting fresh.”

“A clean slate is all we’ve been looking for,” Belinda said.

“You can have it,” Jason said, “if that’s what you choose. Option three is to upgrade who is standing between you and Lucian Lamprey. You’ve seen that my efforts haven’t worked out as well as I thought they would. Emir, on the other hand, is all the protection you could ask for.”

“Why would he help us?” Sophie asked.

“The way you fight. The way we fight. He’s interested in the origins of that style. If he finds out that you use it, I’m certain he’d fully take you under his protection. He’d want you to help him trace back its history, but I don’t imagine that would be an onerous task.”

“Is that how you know him?” Belinda asked. “You’re helping him find the history of the fighting style?”

“No. I met Emir because he’s a friend of a friend. He doesn’t know that either of us can use the style, but I’m of little use to him because I learned it from a skill book.”

“You learned that from a skill book?” Sophie asked, her expression turning curious as it broke out of stern suspicion for the first time since he arrived. “I’ve fought people who used skill books before. Fighting you didn’t feel like that.”

“I’ve had additional training to fully incorporate those skills,” Jason said. “Unless you learned to fight from a skill book too, turning to Emir might be a good option for you.”

“Why haven’t you told him already?” Sophie asked.

“Not my secret to tell.”

“You expect us to believe that?”

“No,” he said, giving them a smile instead of trying to convince them further.

“What’s option four?” Belinda asked.

Before answering, Jason picked up a sandwich and took a generous bite, chewing thoroughly before swallowing. He washed it down by emptying his glass, then slowly poured himself another.

“Really?” Sophie asked and he flashed her a grin.

“I got this from a guy who makes blended fruit drinks here on the Island,” he said. “Not cheap, but what is on the Island?”

Belinda sipped at her glass curiously, eyes going wide at the sweet, pleasant taste. Sophie glared at her, leaving her own glass untouched.

“There was meant to be an auction while I was gone,” Jason said. “All the big spenders were away, though, so they ended up cancelling it. That means the brokers have a few essences and awakening stones available for relatively reasonable prices.”

“Why are you talking about essences?” Sophie asked. “I don’t care how reasonable the prices are; they’re way beyond what we have. We weren’t stealing for the money and margins were slim because high-end jewellery and the like is easy to trace. After expenses, we were barely breaking even. Are you offering us a loan?”

“Option four,” Jason said, “is the original plan. I take you, Sophie, as an indenture. That eliminates your fugitive status, meaning that with a couple more essences, you can sign on to the Adventure Society. You’ll be shielded from Lucian Lamprey and Cole Silva for good. At least, for the purposes they originally intended. Nothing I’ve heard about either suggests they are above petty revenge.”

“You didn’t answer her question,” Belinda said. “How are we meant to afford essences?”

“A loan would not be an inaccurate characterisation,” Jason said. “Joining the Adventure Society would offer you many protections, including from me, but the indenture would still stand.”

“You want me to work it off,” Sophie said.

“Exactly. And once you’re an adventurer, you’ll find that opportunities abound. If you’re willing to work for them.”

“What does that mean?” Sophie asked.

“I’m not entirely sure, to be honest,” Jason said. “There is some kind of competition coming up, organised by our host. He has told me that there are essences and awakening stones to be had. Even if you don’t get enough for your friend, here, you’ll still be an adventurer. It would only be a matter of time.”

“How would that even work?” Belinda asked. “I thought indenture was off the table.”

"I told you earlier: times are changing. You probably didn't hear, shuttered away like this, but the big expedition went wrong. Very wrong. A lot of adventurers died, which is why we left to help."

"Were you any help?" Sophie asked.

"Sophie!" Belinda scolded.

"You seem too weak to help a big adventurer expedition," Sophie said, unrepentant. "You barely caught me."

"You're right," Jason said. "Mostly I just told people where to put up tents until some silver-ranker got rid of me."

"So what does this expedition have to do with the indenture?" Belinda asked.

"Because it went wrong," Jason said, "there's going to be an inquiry. There's a Continental Council that oversees Adventure Society business continent-wide. After the mess that happened, they're sending a team here to conduct some kind of audit on the whole Adventure Society branch."

"You're saying that people will actually have to follow the rules for once," Sophie said.

"At least for a small window of time," Jason said. "It'll be back to business soon enough but until then, the director won't be able to sell out the Society's legal agreement with the city. Which means I can 'recapture' you and the indenture hearing is back on."

"Why?" Sophie asked. "Essences, indenture hearings. Why would you do any of that for us? Are you trying to tell me that Jory is such a good friend to you that you'd go this far over some girl he likes?"

"You know I'm sitting right here," Belinda said.

"I'm not sure you'd believe me if I told you why," Jason said. "I'd guess you believe maybe one word in ten coming out of my mouth."

"If that," Sophie said. "Tell us anyway. You learn a lot about a person from how they lie."

Jason chuckled, leaned back in his chair and took another long drink. The amused half-smile he used to mask his emotions was replaced by a slightly sad, sober expression.

"When I first came here," he said, "I was lost. More lost than you can imagine. I knew no one; nothing made sense. I was tired, beaten and had people trying to kill me, all while doubting my own sanity. I met new friends who helped me get on my feet. They taught me, supported me. Put up with me. They helped me take control of my life."

He paused for a long time, looking out at the ocean. Sophie was about to say something, but Belinda gestured to wait.

“One of them is dead now,” he said. “I think she would like me trying to do the same for someone else. Or maybe she’d yell at me and tell me to sort my own problems out before looking to someone else’s.”

He smiled sadly, but genuinely, his eyes twinkling with moisture. He wiped them and stood up.

“I’ll leave the lunch,” he said. “Talk over what you want to do and tell me when you figure it out. Or vanish and tell me nothing. Up to you.”

He headed through the invisible wall of their suite and made for the door.

“How long do we have to decide?” Belinda called after him and he stopped.

“As long as you can convince Emir to have you,” he said. “If you want to be an adventurer, the sooner the better. I’m not the only one who spotted cheap essences, and the next Adventure Society intake is in nine days. We need to have the indenture hearing, pick out some essences and shove them into you before that.”

He left Belinda and Sophie sitting at the table with a bunch of sandwiches and blended fruit drink.

“If he’s a liar, he’s a good one,” Belinda said.

“He is liar,” Sophie said. “And he is a good one.”

“You think he’s playing us? I don’t see what he would get out of that.”

“Some political game we don’t know enough to see.”

“I don’t know,” Belinda said. “Jory and Clive aren’t like the people we usually deal with. Maybe he isn’t either.”

“Does he feel like that to you?”

“No,” Belinda said. “Those two are easy to read. Asano is more like dark water. You see things in there, but you can’t tell if what you saw was real.”

“I’ve seen people like him before,” Sophie said. “They know you won’t believe what they say, so they tell you five stories and let you figure out which is true.”

“And how do you do that?” Belinda asked.

“That’s the trap; none of them are.”

“So those options he gave us. You don’t think they’re real options?”

“Maybe,” Sophie said. “Maybe he wants us to think they’re our only options.”

“Our current options are to leave or hope we don’t get kicked out,” Belinda said. “If you have something better than what he’s offering, I’m listening.”

“You know I don’t. But I don’t trust him.”

“At this point, we have to trust either him or fate. It wasn’t fate that put us in a magic castle. It was him.”

“That’s what he wants us to think,” Sophie said.

“Maybe we can talk to some of the other people here,” Belinda said. “Get a better sense of him.”

“That’s a good idea,” Sophie said. “Information isolation is our biggest weakness right now.”

“That’s our biggest weakness?”

“The biggest one we can do something about. Press Clive about him, next time he comes by. In the meantime, we can find out who else in this place knows him.”

Jason was leaving the cloud palace when he ran into Emir and Constance coming back. They stopped to chat halfway across the platform connecting the cloud palace to the shore.

“Did you talk to my other guests?” Emir asked.

“I just came from there.”

“And?”

“My guess would be they choose to get sent far from here.”

“The adventuring life not tempting?”

“They don’t trust me,” Jason said. “Probably a smart choice. My first plan didn’t exactly work out.”

Emir chuckled.

“You need to work on that,” he said. “I wasn’t happy to find the camp I put you and Rufus’ friend in charge of being run by some imbecile.”

“You didn’t put us in charge of that camp,” Jason said. “It just kind of worked out that way. Until it didn’t.”

“Are you sure?” Emir asked. “It feels like I put you in charge.”

“You’re the only gold-ranker here,” Jason said. “It probably feels like everything happens because you wanted it to.”

“He’s right,” Constance said. “You didn’t put them in charge.”

“Well, if Constance says so. What are you up to now, Jason?”

“Does no one believe what I have to say, today? I’m off to see Elspeth Arella, to explain why the indenture hearing is going to go the way I want.”

Constance, who was normally a detached professional, creased her brow in confusion.

“You know you’re still an iron-ranker, right?” she asked.

“I do,” Jason said.

“And you're going to march into the office of the silver-rank branch director of the Adventure Society and tell her what to do?”

“I am.”

“Which, if I understand correctly, is exactly what you did last time. After which, she immediately played you for a fool.”

“That would be an accurate summation, yes,” Jason said.

“I hope you aren't going to be throwing around Mr Bahadir's name.”

“I have a little more decorum than that,” Jason said. “I have my own levers to push, thank you.”

“Very well,” she said, her expression still a warning.

“We'll let you get to it,” Emir said. “Good luck.”

They parted ways, Emir and Constance returning to the palace. Out of sight from outsiders, Constance's posture became more relaxed.

“Rufus was right,” Constance said. “That boy is mad.”

“That's the things about climbing mountains,” Emir said. “The first thing you need is someone foolish enough to try it.”

“I never saw the point of that as a recreational activity,” Constance said. “Putting a suppression collar on yourself and clambering up an edifice? If they're that keen on danger, why not fight monsters, like regular people?”

“The point is that they're challenging themselves to do what others think can't be done,” Emir said.

“That man Koenig who used to work for you when I first started. He liked to climb mountains, didn't he?”

“He did, indeed,” Emir said. “He was quite the enthusiast.”

“What happened to him?”

“He fell off a mountain and died.”

“Don't a lot of people die trying to climb mountains?”

“Yes,” Emir said. “Yes, they do.”

Chapter 115: Nothing Can Hurt You Like Hope

The door to Arella's office opened itself as Jason approached and he walked right in. Sitting behind her desk, she made a gesture and the door closed behind him. He stood in front of the desk, looking around.

"You've changed the artwork."

"I'm surprised you showed your face," she said. "I suppose I shouldn't have expected any bounds on your arrogance."

"That's probably fair. I should thank you, though, for the object lesson in the pitfalls of being arrogant. Your mistake was the same every time; you never consider how your actions hurt other people. The thief you tried to hand over to Lamprey. The iron-rankers you made look buffoonish at their inability to catch her. Your own officials being squeezed between you and the Duke. That was already hurting you, but the expedition? There's plenty of blame to go around but we both know that you're in line for a hearty serving. You alienated your allies and made deals with your enemies."

Arella looked at him with open disgust.

"You really never tire of hearing your own voice, do you?"

"I do like to monologue, don't I? Next thing you know, I'll be building a weather machine in a mountain fortress carved into the shape of my own head."

"You also like to babble nonsense. What are you here for, Asano?"

"Are you still going to revoke my membership?"

"You know I'm not."

"All those eyes on you make petty revenge a little harder, don't they?"

"If that's all you want, then get out."

"There is one thing," Jason said. "There needs to be a new sentence-dispensation hearing for the thief. I need to know you won't try and sabotage it again."

She gave him an angry glare.

"You know full-well that I can't interfere. Not if I want to still be in this office a month from now."

"You say that, but the last time I was in here was to ask for the same thing. You said it would go smoothly but I bet you had a messenger on their way to Lamprey before I was out of the building. I'm here for assurances."

"You think you can make demands?"

"I tried cooperation. And yes; I think I can make demands."

“I could crush you into paste without getting out of this chair.”

“Could you, though? You’re a smart woman, director. Not as smart as you think, but enough to know the consequences of that. You’ve disillusioned your allies while I keep making friends. I told you that your mistake was not caring who your games hurt. Kill me and you won’t just lose this office; you’ll die in it.”

She reached out an arm in a clutching motion, her silver-rank reflexes too fast for Jason to react. His aura was ground down to nothing, then an invisible force picked him up, lifting him into the air as it squeezed him from every direction. The crushing force wracked his whole body with pain.

“You’re so sure of yourself,” she said. She was still reclined in her chair, hand held out toward him.

“Yes,” he croaked, looking back with defiance. She squeezed all the harder until his muscles felt like pulp, his bones on the verge of breaking. His head was ready to pop like a pimple.

She floated up, out of her seat and over her desk until they were face to face. Hers held a sneer, while his was turning purple.

“Power trumps everything,” she told him. “It doesn’t matter how clever you are or how well you can manipulate the rules. Schemes and laws are nothing in the face of complete and absolute power.”

“Do it then,” he choked out. “Are you powerful enough to handle the consequences?”

She opened her clenched hand and he dropped to floor, immediately collapsing. She floated down and gently on the floor, looking down on him as he gasped and spluttered.

“Get out of my office,” she told him.

Jason pushed himself achingly into a sitting position, then stood up with a groan, looking her straight in the eye.

“I told you,” he said. “I came for assurances.”

She let out a disbelieving laugh.

“You’re bold for someone hiding behind the strength of others.”

“You do what you can with what you have,” Jason said. “Something I imagine you know very well.”

She sneered.

“You said assurances. What kind of assurances do you want?”

“You misunderstand,” Jason said. “When I said I’m here for assurances, it was to give them, not receive.”

“What are you talking about?”

“If you don’t keep your hand off the scale for the sentence-dispensation, then that inquiry coming up will be hearing from me.”

“The secret is already out, Asano. People know my family history.”

“Not that,” Jason said. “I mean the fact that an Adventure Society director undertook no small effort to prevent the completion of a contract she herself posted. You’ll be lucky to keep your membership after that, let alone your position.”

“You have no proof.”

“You were sloppy. Too reliant on no one guessing what you were up to. You think the inquiry won’t find anything, once they know to look? Even if you start cleaning up the moment I walk out of here, how many bodies will you have to drop? Are you sure you can get them all? I don’t think you can. There are too many threads and chasing them all down would just make more.”

Her hand twitched up, then down again. He gave her a predatory smile.

“Killing me only hurts you,” he said. “You know that, and you have much bigger problems than me. Danielle Geller isn’t back, yet, but you’ll know about it when she is. I told you your mistake was not considering the collateral damage of your plotting. She once thought quite highly of you but she lost family out there.”

Arella’s face scrunched up in reluctance and unreleased fury.

“What assurance do I have that you won’t burn me with the inquiry anyway?” she asked, biting off her words.

“The last time I came in here asking you to uphold the rules, I trusted you and got burned for my trouble. This time, you have to trust me.”

She forced out a nod.

“I’ll direct the advocate to defend the tenets of the service agreement with the city,” she said, biting her words off unhappily.

“All I wanted to hear,” he said and immediately turned for the door.

“Asano,” she called out and he stopped to look back.

“You really would have stood between Lamprey and this girl, wouldn’t you?” she asked.

“Is that why you sold me out? You didn’t think I had the resolve?”

The anger seemed to wash out of her, shoulders slumping and face suddenly haggard, in spite of its silver rank perfection.

“Call it a lesson learned. Things won’t be going well for me in the near future, but I will climb back up.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Jason said.

“I also won’t forget the iron-ranker that walked into my office to put his foot on my neck when I was down.”

Belinda watched with concern as Sophie paced back and forth on the terrace. Her friend rarely showed her anxiety, which meant she was running close to the edge.

“If they’re really willing to send us far from here,” Sophie said, “I think we do that, then get far from where they sent us. Put them and this whole city behind us.”

She sped up her pacing, running her hands through her hair. Normally she tied it back in a pony tail, but today it was loose and wild.

“That’s assuming we can trust going through some portal they set up,” she continued, “which we absolutely can’t. Maybe the best option really is leaving and making our own way from here.”

Belinda got up from her chair, placing herself in Sophie’s path, who stopped, looking up as if surprised she was there at all. Belinda took her in a hug, Sophie’s arms slipping around her in turn, gripping her like a security blanket.

“You know we can’t walk out of here as fugitives,” Belinda said softly. “Even if we got out of the Adventure Society grounds, which we wouldn’t, there was a reason we turned to Ventress for protection. If we go out into the city, things are worse for us now than they were then.”

Belinda let go of Sophie and went through the invisible wall into their suite.

“I’m having a drink,” she said. “So are you.”

The sprawling main area of the guest suite was one open space, but had areas divided up for lounging, dining, a kitchen and a bar. Belinda snagged a couple of glasses and a bottle, bringing them back outside. They sat down and Sophie took the first shot without tasting it, before sipped at the second.

“You realise this bottle cost more than most of the things we’ve ever stolen,” Belinda said.

“I thought we’d half-emptied this bottle. Did you get it from the cooler cabinet?”

“I got it from the bar. You know there’s a floor cabinet and two wall cabinets with drinks in addition to the bar?” Belinda asked. “How am I meant to remember where any given bottle came from?”

“You know there’s a wine room,” Sophie said.

“No, where is it?”

“You know the floaty things that lifts you to the upper floor?”

“Yeah.”

"If you hit that gold patch next to it on the wall twice, it goes down instead."

"This place is crazy."

Sophie looked at the glass in her hand, then at the cloud palace around them.

"Everything about this whole experience is crazy," she said.

"It'll be hard to give up," Belinda said. "If that's the way we decide to go."

Sophie frowned.

"You think we should go along with Asano's plan."

"You know I'll follow you, whatever you decide," Belinda said.

"You get just as much say as I do," Sophie insisted.

"Great," Belinda said, standing up. "I'll go find Asano and we can get you some essences."

"Hold on," Sophie said, half-standing in her seat. Belinda flashed her a grin and sat back down.

"What happened to I get as much say as you?" Belinda asked.

"As much," Sophie said as she gave Belinda a flat look. "Not more."

"You know I was only half-joking," Belinda said. "Even if we get so far from here we don't have to deal with Silva or Ventress or Lamprey, do you really want to go from this back to stealing?"

"We're good at stealing."

"What if we're good at something else? What if we didn't have to live by the whims of some sadistic crime lord? You know that wherever we went, there will always be a Clarissa Ventress or Cole Silva. If we turn down this chance, that will be our lives. Forever."

"We could do something else," Sophie said. "Something legal."

"Like what? Open a shop?"

"We could be locksmiths," Sophie said. "That's assuming even the offer to send us away is real. We've been stuck in this box, only hearing what they want us to hear. They could be using us for anything."

"Why would they bother?" Belinda asked. "Look at where we are. Look at who they are. Look at what we're drinking! What could we possibly offer Bahadir that he can't just take? At what point does this much effort in service to some elaborate ruse become less plausible than they just want to help us? I think we've crossed that line. What they're offering may seem outlandish to us, but clearly that isn't the case for them. They're adventurers, making adventurer money."

Sophie took a deep breath as she considered what Belinda had to say.

“My instincts are still screaming at me to run,” she said. “The better things seem, the worse it will be when the floor falls out from under us. Nothing can hurt you as badly as hope.”

Belinda looked at her friend from under raised eyebrows.

“Really, Soph? Nothing can hurt you like hope? Is that how you want to live your life?”

“When were our lives ever different? We both had dead parents and massive debts when we were still children.”

“That’s exactly why I think we should take a risk,” Belinda said. “We were already risking everything on these crazy jobs, and for what? The chance to go somewhere else and have different crappy lives? I don’t want to go back to stealing for whatever murderous lunatic is in charge of wherever we end up.”

She gestured at the sky palace around them.

“I want more of this. This is worth risking everything for.”

Sophie looked at her friend for a long time. She took the bottle, poured herself a large drink and gulped it down.

“Alright,” she said finally.

“Alright?”

“Yeah.”

A huge grin broke out on Belinda’s face.

“Sophie Wexler, adventurer.”

“Don’t get carried away.”

“Your going to be an adventurer!”

“This could all still go horribly wrong.”

“That means I’m going to be an adventurer too, sooner or later.”

“You’ll have to earn how to fight,” Sophie said. Despite her best efforts, a smile was creeping its way onto her face.

“I know how to fight,” Belinda said.

“Kicking a guy in the beans and then running for it is not fighting.”

“It got me this far.”

Chapter 116: See You in Court

Elsbeth Arella was in the family home she had spent very little time in, even as a child. Raised by her mother in secret, now the secret was finally out and she was free to come and go as she pleased. Those precious, clandestine visits to her father, Dorgan, were in the past; she could casually come by to take tea in one of his courtyards.

“Your mistake was your need to feel in control,” Dorgan told her. “You had a choice between letting Asano bear the brunt of Lamprey’s ire, or cutting a deal with Lamprey yourself.”

“I didn’t think Asano could stand up to Lamprey.”

“The boy is arrogant and reckless,” Dorgan said. “He would have stood up to Lamprey. Probably not successfully, but that wouldn’t have mattered. If Lamprey put the boy down, that would have given you all the leverage you needed. You didn’t choose that path, because it felt passive. You wanted events to move by your hand, so you took the initiative and went to Lamprey.”

“It felt right,” Arella said.

“Our feelings are not always the wisest guide. Even if it had gone well, dealing directly with Lamprey wouldn’t have given you anything you couldn’t get by waiting. All it brought you was a risk, the consequences of which you subsequently suffered. Now, with the unfortunate fate of the expedition, you have been left critically exposed.”

She nodded.

“I was impatient,” she said. “What do I do next?”

“For now, you must be above reproach,” he told her. “Every rule, every stipulation. This is not the time to push for new goals. The inquiry will remove you or not. Only once the decision is made will we know the way forward.”

“If they remove me, everything we’ve done will be wasted.”

“Not everything,” he said. “Our connection is in the open now and while it may not be endorsed, it is tolerated. If we have to start again, we will. Who doesn’t like a redemption story?”

“I really want to crush Asano under my heel,” she said. “If he hadn’t caught the thief...”

“If he hadn’t, it was past time for you to arrange her capture anyway. You had already let it play out too long. Asano was the perfect foil with which to jab Lamprey and the mistake was yours in not using him properly.”

“He stormed into my office to demand I help him with his damn agenda. Twice!”

“Don't make Lamprey's mistake and become fixated on someone unimportant to your ultimate goals. If you really must do something about Asano, then be patient. After the inquiry is done we can act, but at a careful remove. If we move deftly, then once he is dead the vengeance of his friends will fall on those whose removal will advantage us.”

“How do we do that?” she asked.

“Lucian Lamprey and Cole Silva are kindred spirits. When the time is right, we can help them make a connection.”

“What about Lamprey's dealings with Clarissa Ventress? Her and Silva hate each other.”

“Ventress failed to deliver what she promised to Lamprey months ago. By the time we choose to act, I would be astounded to find her still alive.”

Rufus and Gary had been highly motivated to find out who was behind the activities in the astral space. The various magical paraphernalia discovered there would only arrive once the expedition returned overland, but Rufus could not be talked into waiting. He roped Gary into scouring Magic Society records and the library at the temple of knowledge for any reference to the bizarre enemies they faced in the astral space. The first time their friends had seen them in days was when they arrived at the courthouse, showing their solidarity for Jason.

Belinda remained in the cloud palace for safety while Jason took Sophie into court for the sentence dispensation hearing. Until her docket was called she was required to stay the courtroom gaol in the basement to await her hearing. Jason took Gary along, who stayed to watch for any last-minute schemes while Sophie was trapped and isolated. As Jason was leaving, one of the guards stopped him. The guard threw an uncertain glance in the direction of Gary, who was leaning against the wall by Sophie's cell.

“He can't stay here,” the guard said.

Jason looked over at the huge, hairy form of Gary, then back at the guard.

“You'd best go tell him, then, because damned if I'm doing it.”

Leaving the nonplussed guard in his wake, Jason went back upstairs. On the ground floor, just outside the courtroom entrance, he spotted Vincent and Rufus talking to someone. Vincent spotted Jason in turn and waved him over.

“This is Rupert Cline,” Vincent introduced. Rupert was a neatly put together man of around thirty, with an iron-rank aura. “He was the one who gave us the warning about Arella and Lamprey.”

Jason shook Rupert's hand.

"Thank you for that," he said. "You kept a pair of young women from an unpleasant fate."

"We're Adventure Society right?" Rupert asked. "Standing between people and the bad stuff what we're for."

Jason flashed a grin.

"Yes we are," he said happily. "It's nice to meet a fellow idealist."

Vincent and Rufus shared a sceptical look, noticed by Jason.

"What?" he asked them.

"It's just strange to see you meeting someone and acting like a sensible person," Vincent said.

"That's hurtful," Jason said.

"I heard about what you put Clive through when you first met him."

"Jory told me to do that. Clive thought I was counterfeiting spirit coins or something."

"He did?"

"Yeah. Never really came up again after I told him I was an outworlder."

"What's an outworlder?" Rupert asked.

They chatted until Rupert had to go inside and Jason, Vincent and Rufus went upstairs to the viewing gallery. They took seats to await proceedings to begin. Jason's knowledge of courtrooms was sourced heavily on television. The Greenstone court was less like an American legal procedural and more like a British period drama. The gallery was mezzanine viewing, looking down the courtroom.

As they waited, a man with a silver-rank aura arrived in the gallery. Despite being an elf, muscles bulged under his expensive clothes. He was wearing a Magic Society pin, fancier than the usual and embossed in a strange metal that shimmered with rainbow colours. The man stopped on his way to a seat, turning to look at Jason.

"So you're Asano," he said.

"Yep. You must be... actually, I have no idea who you are," Jason said.

"I'm Lucian Lamprey."

"Doesn't ring a bell. I see you're in the Magic Society. Are you one of those guys who work in a booth identifying magic items?"

"What? A booth?"

"Haven't heard about that yet? You're probably new, so that's alright. You should make sure and learn about all the services the Magic Society offers though. Wouldn't want to get fired."

“I’m the director of the Magic Society.”

“You’re Pochard Finn? I thought you’d be thinner.”

“Pochard Finn is my deputy. I’m Lucian Lamprey.”

“Still doesn’t ring a bell. Are you sure?”

Lamprey opened his mouth to shoot back when he saw Vincent and Rufus stifling laughter. Lamprey moved closer, looming over the still sitting Jason.

“You should know better than to mock me,” Lamprey warned.

Jason craned his head back to look up at Lamprey’s face.

“Mate, you’re hardly in a position to point out what others are doing wrong. Using the power of your position to force women into sleeping with you? That’s about as sleazy as it gets. Is it even necessary? You’re super ripped; I bet there are plenty of people who respond to that. Is it a charm deficit? Just keep the mouth shut, bathe regularly and do the strong but silent thing. You’ll get some takers.”

A sinister smile cross Lamprey’s face.

“You were always going to pay for this, Asano. For your mockery, I’ll make sure you pay slow.”

“Like a layaway plan? You seem like the kind of guy who’d shaft me on the interest. I’d rather pay for doing the right thing than roll over and let someone like you do whatever he likes.”

“There will come a day when I remind you of those words. We’ll see what you say then.”

“Probably something about carb-loading. What do you bench?”

Lamprey shook his head, looking at Jason like he was a mad person before walking off to take a seat at the other end of the gallery.

“Why would you provoke him like that?” Vincent asked.

“He was coming after me either way; he said it himself. I’d rather he do something angry than something smart.”

“You play dangerous games, Jason,” Rufus warned. “Someday you’re going to pay for that.”

“I know.”

Sophie was brought up from the basement cells and placed in the prisoner dock, where she would have to stand for the duration of the proceedings. Jason realised that he’d never really stopped and taken a good look at her. They’d met briefly under normal circumstances, months ago, but most of their encounters had come when she’d been cornered, bloodied and dirty.

He had seen her enough to know she preferred simple clothes, more fitted and practical than the normal fashion. Today was no different, wearing white that appealingly set off her dark complexion. They showed-off the physique of an athlete, sleek and strong.

Physically, she was a study in contrasts. Her silver hair was tied back in a simple ponytail, bright against her chocolate skin. Her features were delicate, for such an indelicate woman; rather than make her seem fragile, there was a sharpness to them. A promise of danger in her silver eyes that moved around the room, taking everything in. He noticed them linger on the exits.

As she looked around the room she met Jason's gaze and held it, her eyes full of challenge. She was surrounded by power, her fate in the hands of strangers and yet she stood upright, proud and fearless. Jason understood in that moment why men like Lamprey and Cole Silva had such a need to possess or destroy her.

"You know, Rufus," Jason said. "I think she might be prettier than you."

"She's not," Vincent said.

"Thank you," Rufus said as Jason chuckled.

The hearing moved swiftly; the real decision-making had already happened behind closed doors. The Adventure Society advocate, Rupert Cline, asserted the Adventure Society's right to claim her indenture through the Adventure Society member who captured her and the magistrate agreed without challenge. Lamprey had apparently given up, knowing it was futile.

Soon after, Jason, Gary, Rufus and Vincent were leaving the courthouse with Sophie. There was a silver tracking bracelet on her wrist, but she was otherwise unfettered.

"We should go," Rufus said to Gary. "We've been away from our investigation long enough. We need to find who these people that killed Farrah were."

Gary threw Jason a look.

"Actually," Jason said, "I was hoping you could help me with something. I want Sophie in the next Adventure Society intake. I need your expertise to get her ready."

"I already have something to do," Rufus said.

"Rufus, you don't have enough information. Wait until the expedition returns with everything they collected. Clive is their astral magic guy and he'll tell us what he finds. That means you'll know where to look instead of stumbling blindly. When the time comes for action, you'll be rested and ready."

A look of reluctance crossed Rufus' face, but Jason pre-empted him.

“What would Farrah tell you to do?” Jason asked him. “Would she tell you to work hard or work smart? Do what you’re good at now and do the next thing when it’s ready to be done.”

Rufus looked unhappy but nodded.

“Alright, then,” Jason said. “Sophie, you’re in for a treat. He’s reluctant to tell people, but Rufus’ family actually runs a school for adventurers...”

The other looked at Jason as he trailed off.

➤ Contact [Phoebe Geller] has entered communication range.

“What is it?” Gary asked.

-
- Contact [Rick Geller] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Hannah Adeah] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Claire Adeah] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Thalia Mercer] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Danielle Geller] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Cassandra Mercer] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Humphrey Geller] has entered communication range.
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“The expedition,” Jason said. “They’re back.”

Chapter 117: Six-Month Lease

The arrival of the expedition was a mix of welcome, relief, commiseration and loss. Rufus and Gary waded into the chaos while Vincent headed for the administration building and the immense amount of work about to be dumped on him. Lacking anything else to do, Sophie trailed along behind Jason to the marshalling yard.

They found the Gellers, Rufus and Gary moving to talk to Danielle. With the arrival at the marshalling yard, her job as expedition leader was finally over. The strain was showing, even through the vitality of silver rank. As Rufus and Gary greeted her, Jason sought out the iron-rank Gellers. He met a tired-looking Humphrey with a broad smile and a warm handshake.

“Welcome home, mate; glad you made it. It was a bit touch-and-go there, from what I hear. Sorry I wasn’t there to help.”

“I’m not,” Humphrey said. “I’m glad you didn’t have to go through it. Life and death were separated by not much more than luck. Everyone lost people and we were no exception.”

Jason knew a lot of the iron-rank Gellers by sight, and some familiar faces were missing. The one he knew best was Henry Geller, who he had fought in their now-infamous mirage chamber clash.

Rick Geller came up and shook Jason by the hand.

“I want to thank you,” he said. “What you did to us in the mirage chamber; we were better prepared for when things went truly wrong. We had lived with the idea of losing people and still moving forward. It was worse for real; so much worse. We held it together, though, even after losing people. You helped us get ready for that.”

Claire Adeah was one of the two elf sisters on Ricks team. Of them all, she had resented Jason’s actions in their mock battle the most. She stepped up next to Rick and offered Jason her hand and he shook it.

“Rick’s right,” she said. “I didn’t like what you did, back then, but it was nothing next to the real thing.”

“I’d like to say that was my intention,” Jason said. “Honestly, though, I was just looking for a way to win.”

“It doesn’t matter why,” Rick said. “You helped us stay alive when we might not have otherwise.”

“No, that’s on you,” Jason said. “You got as many people as you could out of there when much stronger adventurers were dying.”

Rick nodded.

“We heard about your friend,” he said. “You should look around you, right now. A lot of these people wouldn’t be here if she hadn’t bought them the time to survive.”

Jason looked around, seeing the faces of strangers.

“I’d trade them all to get her back,” he said. “Does that make me a bad person?”

“It makes you someone lying to yourself,” a voice came from behind him. He turned as Cassandra fell into his embrace.

“If you really had the choice,” she whispered into his ear, “you’d let her save those people.”

“It doesn’t feel like that,” he whispered back.

They drew apart, their hands held together between them.

“How did your family come out?” he asked. “How’s your brother?”

“We lost people, but not many as some. Thadwick woke up on the way back. He’s... different.”

“Coming that close to death can change you,” Jason said.

She nodded.

“It’s like he’s finally seen how empty all the nonsense he built up around himself is. How much all the things he cared about were just worthless bluster in the face of real power. I think this will be good for him, in the end.”

“We should take what good we can from all this mess,” Jason said.

“I do have one question,” Cassandra said with a sweet, tired smile.

“What’s that?”

“Why is that very attractive young woman staring at us?”

“No idea what you’re talking about,” Jason said innocently.

“No?” Cassandra asked, turning her head to examine Sophie. “You didn’t notice the extremely pretty woman with the silver hair and the tracking bracelet.”

“Oh, her.”

“Yes, her.”

“She’s new.”

“Yes, I imagine I would have spotted her before. She stands out.”

“You don’t need to bother about her.”

“Don’t I, now?”

“Not at all. That’s just my nubile slave girl.”

“WHAT?” came Sophie and Cassandra’s simultaneous exclamation, to a backdrop of Jason’s wild cackling as a gaggle of people started talking over one another.

“I’m not a slave!”

“You have some serious explaining to do, Asano!”

“Jason, I think you’re my hero now.”

“What I have can’t be taught, Rick.”

“Just try treating me like a slave I will drown you in your own...”

“HEY!”

Rufus’ booming voice cut through the noise as he marched over.

“What is going on here?” he asked. “Jason, what did you do?”

“Why do you assume it was me?”

“Was it you?”

“Well, yes, but where’s the faith?”

“What were you thinking, causing a commotion here?”

“I thought people could use some normalcy,” Jason said. “What’s more normal than two women fighting over a sexy man?”

“You can have him,” Cassandra told Sophie.

“Don’t want him; you can keep him.”

“That’s hurtful,” Jason said, looking between the two.

“Jason, this isn’t the time for your nonsense,” Rufus said.

“Rufus, this is exactly the time. There will be days and days of mourning the lost.

These people just got home safe and they need just a few moments to celebrate surviving. A little laughter; a little joy. There won’t a lot of that for a while.”

“I don’t agree with you at all,” Rufus said, then sighed and gave him a sad smile.

“Farrah would have, though,” he said. “Just be respectful of people.”

“That’s fair,” Jason said. He gave Rufus a rare, earnest smile; a far cry from his usual ones where he looked like he was up to something. He turned to Cassandra.

“Do you have to go home, or do you have some time for a debonair gentleman caller?”

“Oh, you have some questions to answer,” she said. “You’ll be answering them now.”

“I’m an open book,” Jason said. “Come along, slave girl.”

“I’m not your slave!”

“She’s a rental,” Jason said as they started extricating themselves from the busy marshalling yard. “Six-month lease.”

“You didn’t rent me!”

"I have a receipt."

"It's an indenture contract."

"Why do you even have an indentured servant?" Cassandra asked.

"Well, you know how you said I should catch that thief?"

Cassandra looked over at Sophie.

"That was you?"

"It was," Sophie said unhappily.

"Frankly, I'm surprised he caught you."

"It was his friend who figured out how to ambush us."

"It was a team effort," Jason said. "And since I was team leader, the credit is primarily mine."

"What team?" Sophie asked. "There were only two of you."

"Senior partner, then."

"Does Standish know you were the senior partner?"

"I think he intuited it," Jason said.

"I think you're full of crap," Sophie said.

"I like her," Cassandra said. "But how did she end up indentured to you?"

"Ah," Jason said. "That is a tale of vicious crime lords, shady politicians and a handsome adventurer, generous of spirit..."

Rick Geller watched Jason saunter off, shamelessly boasting to a pair of beautiful women.

"I want to be just like him," he said wistfully, then received a hard thump on the arm. He yelped, turning to see, Claire had been the one to hit him.

"What was that for?"

"The man is infuriating," Sophie said. She was back in her shared suite with Belinda. They were standing at the terrace rail, enjoying the cool ocean breeze.

"How so?" Belinda asked.

"He keeps calling me a slave."

"Does he treat you like a slave?"

"That's not the point."

"It really is," Belinda said.

"He called me a nubile slave girl."

Belinda burst out laughing.

"That is not funny!"

"You're complaining about being called a slave while you live like a princess, complete with enchanted castle."

"Yeah, well... you don't know what he's up to."

"You're right," Belinda said. "He didn't want you around after the indenture hearing?"

"He's down the hall with his upper-class lover. I'm not sticking around for that, whatever the terms of indenture are."

"He has a lady friend? What's she like?"

"She's a Mercer. Main family too; not one of the branches. Obnoxiously good-looking."

Belinda groaned.

"I know what the pretty ones are like to deal with," she complained.

"She seems alright. Wait, was that directed at me?"

"It makes sense that she's a big nob," Belinda said, ignoring Sophie's question. "Look at the company Asano keeps."

"What's his background?" Sophie asked. "What have you managed to dig out of Standish?"

"A job offer, actually. Clive asked me to come work with him. Assuming that all this political stuff gets settled."

"What does he want you to do?"

"Be a research assistant, which I'm pretty sure means taking care of all the mundane stuff he doesn't have time for. He's expecting to be very busy, soon."

"Are you sure he isn't looking for something more intimate?"

"He had a thing for that friend of Asano's who died. He's not hiding it very well, just throwing himself into his work."

"Are you going to take the job?"

"Of course. In the Magic Society, I can learn more about that Lamprey guy. Asano might think he has all this handled, but I doubt we've heard the end of it."

"What did you get from Standish about Asano?"

"According to Clive," Belinda said, "Jason isn't even from this world."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, you know the world?" Belinda asked.

"Of course I know the world," Sophie said. "It's a big round thing. We're standing on it."

"Actually, we're standing on the cloud palace."

"And the cloud palace is sitting on the world. By your reasoning, you aren't standing on the ground if you're wearing shoes."

"That's actually a good point," Belinda conceded with a frown.

"You don't need to sound surprised," Sophie said.

"Sorry," Belinda said. "What were we talking about? Right, the world. Generally, you think about the world as being everything, right?"

"But you're saying it isn't."

"That's exactly what I'm saying. Asano comes from a whole other world that's apparently out there."

"A whole different world," Sophie mused.

"Yes," Belinda said. "Uh, but no."

"What?"

"Well, it's a different world. Except, it's the same world. But different. It's complicated."

"I can tell by the fact that the only part of that I could follow was that the rest of it was complicated. You said he came from another world."

"Yes."

"But then you said that this different world is the same world."

"No. Except, yes. They're different versions of the same world. Like when we helped Donzo with the fake spirit coin racket."

"I can't believe I let you talk me into that. You're saying Asano comes from a counterfeit world?"

"No, both worlds are real."

"Then it's not a terrific comparison."

Belinda glared at Sophie.

"Maybe if you ever read a book that went three pages without the phrase 'glistening thighs,' I wouldn't have to dumb it down so much."

"Oh, so I should have been reading all that boring nonsense you collect in case I ever became the nubile slave girl of some guy from a world knocked out by some godly equivalent of Donzo making fake money in his bathtub?"

"Exactly," Belinda said.

They looked at each other and both erupted into laughter. They wandered into the lounge area and crashed down together on a couch.

“How is this our life?” Belinda asked, reclining back into the soft, cloudy furniture. “It’s like things kept getting worse and worse, until they so bad they came right around the other end to amazing and we somehow live in a magic palace, now.”

“This is just temporary. We need to be ready for what comes next.”

“What comes next is you getting amazing magical powers,” Belinda said. “You know I blame you for all this.”

“How is this my fault? Also, you just said this is amazing.”

“If you shaved off all that shiny, silver hair, you might not get creepy guys chasing after you.”

“You want me to run around bald?”

“You could wear a wig to cover it up,” Belinda said. “It would have to be an ugly one, though, or it would defeat the purpose. Bald would be best, thinking about it.”

“I’ll do it if you do,” Sophie said.

“And give up these natural curls? No thank you.”

The room chime rang and Belinda went and pressed the gold patch on the wall that turned the door translucent. On the other side was Jason.

“If you’d like to come with me, ladies.”

“What happened to your lady friend?” Belinda asked.

“She only just got back and has her own responsibilities. Our reunion was short but sweet.”

“Stamina issues?” Sophie asked, walking up behind Belinda.

“My stamina is just fine,” Jason said defensively.

“Sure it is,” Sophie said.

“I’m perfectly virile, thank you very much.”

“Where do you want us to go, exactly?” Belinda asked.

“I have assembled a panel of seasoned adventurers for advice and a catalogue of goods that are available – and affordable – from the brokers at the trade hall. It’s time for your friend to choose her essences.”

Chapter 118: The Perks of Being an Essence User

Jason introduced Sophie and Belinda to his panel of seasoned adventurers. It turned out to be comprised of Emir and Clive, who they knew, plus a bald, dark-skinned man that they didn't. He was handsome, lithely muscled and carried himself with an air of straightforward competence. Even with him just sitting at a table, Sophie read the subtle cues that told her he would be dangerous if he needed to be.

The assured sense of capability he gave off was the exact opposite of what she read from Asano. In her encounters with him, Jason had variously come across as casual, dangerous, friendly, manipulative, vulnerable, controlling and buffoonish. She had no idea which, if any of what she had seen was genuine.

The room was a small dining room, by cloud palace standards, with a wall open to one of the ubiquitous terraces. The three adventurers were on one side of the table, Jason and the two women taking seats on the other.

"You know Emir, and Clive, of course," Jason said. "Emir is the most experienced adventurer in the city, and Clive works for the Magic Society. He's spent no small amount of time cataloguing essence abilities, mine included."

"Speaking of which," Clive said, "I really would like to hear more about that execute ability of yours..."

"Not the topic of the day, Clive," Jason said, gesturing for him to stop before he became too enthused. "The last member of our impromptu advice panel is Rufus Remore."

"The one who taught you to fight," Sophie said, giving Rufus a second look.

"Someone's paying attention," Jason said. "Rufus comes from a prestigious academy, so he knows quite a lot about matching people to essences. Rufus, this is Sophie Wexler and Belinda Callahan."

Rufus nodded a greeting.

"Can the three of you explain to me why this is happening?" Sophie asked and Belinda slumped forward.

"Really, Soph?"

"I still don't understand why Asano is doing any of this," Sophie said. "Why bother, for some people he hardly knows?"

"You've known him the longest, Rufus," Emir said. "I have to admit to sharing the young lady's curiosity."

All eyes turned to Rufus, who was thinking over a reply.

“The day I met Jason,” he said, “We were all caught up in circumstances I can only describe as dire. This was especially true for him, who had no idea what was happening or why. As you will no doubt learn for yourselves, Jason can be quite resourceful when it matters most and he managed to get himself free. He got out of his cage and had a clear run at freedom.”

“He’s exaggerating,” Jason said. “I would have been easily caught.”

“So he says,” Rufus countered.

“Did you say cage?” Belinda asked.

“Yes,” Rufus said. “My team and I were in quite the unfortunate circumstance, except for one thing: we met Jason. He didn’t take that run at freedom. Instead of escaping, he walked back into the sacrifice chamber of a blood cult. He was outnumbered and outmatched but he walked right in. He did that to rescue three strangers, which is the only reason I’m alive to tell you this story.”

“I needed them to get me out,” Jason said. “If I didn’t get them out I would have died by cultist or by desert. Rufus just likes to put it down to altruism.”

“Yes I do,” Rufus said.

“You really expect us to believe he’s doing this out of the goodness of his heart?” Sophie asked.

“You can believe what you like,” Rufus said. “You can still just walk away.”

“No,” Belinda said, giving the others a plastered-on smile. “She’s going to clamp those lips together before she talks us out of the best opportunity we’ve ever had.”

“Her caution is well placed,” Emir said. “In all my time as an adventurer, I’ve never encountered a situation like this. I would be suspicious, as well.”

“What’s it going to be, ladies?” Jason asked. “If you want to walk away, I won’t stop you. Your indenture isn’t violated unless I say so, which I won’t. We can still put you through a portal to a destination of your choosing.”

“No,” Belinda said, putting a hand firmly over Sophie’s. “We decided to accept your offer.”

Sophie glanced unhappily at Belinda, then gave Jason a reluctant nod.

“Alright, then,” Jason said, pulling two sheets of paper from his inventory. “This first sheet is a list of all the essences that are available and that I can afford. The second list is awakening stones with the same conditions, although if I can afford those at all will come down to which essences we go with.”

“You don’t seem short of money,” Sophie said, eyes moving over the cloud palace around them.

"This place is mine," Emir said. "Jason's plans for you are his, as is the cost of carrying them out."

"You're saddled with the poorest adventurer in the cloud palace. That's not a complaint, mind you. I have far more money than most; I just happen to keep exalted company."

"Except for us," Belinda said.

"Give it time," Jason said with an encouraging smile.

He picked up the first list and they started going through the essences. Hours passed as they discussed the value of various combinations, what they offered and what would be required from their user. Sophie already possessed the swift essence, along with the single ability that awakened when she acquired it. She had never gained a second ability in the more than half-dozen years since. It was more than enough to raise that one ability to bronze rank, even without training or monster cores.

They needed to select two more essences for Sophie to complete a combination. Emir offered the insight of experience, having seen many essences in action. Clive had a tablet with the full list of recorded abilities from the Magic Society and years of cataloguing such abilities. He was the best equipped to describe the kind of powers each combination was likely to awaken. Rufus had seen many people at his family's school learning to use their abilities and understood the skills and training required to make the most of various power sets.

"The balance essence has a high-skill requirement," Rufus said.

"And by skill, he doesn't just mean quick hands or combat technique," Emir said. "Many skill-based abilities do require them but it isn't always about reflexes and muscle memory."

"Timing, judgement and the ability to anticipate are all key," Rufus said. "When Jason was chasing you, you got away, yet woke up to find him waiting for you. You think that was an accident? He sent you to where he knew he could find you. That is the kind of skill that makes for great adventurers."

"Thank you," Jason said brightly.

"Potentially great," Rufus corrected. "Very, very eventually."

"That's less nice, but I'll take it."

"The difference between simple abilities and skill abilities is their effectiveness when used inexpertly," Rufus explained. "Simple abilities are easy to use and broadly effective, even with an inexpert user. A bolt of lightning that tracks enemies isn't hard to get right."

Skill abilities fall flat if not employed correctly. Use them the right way, in the right moment, though, and they can turn a fight on its head.”

“Swift and balance is an interesting essence pairing,” Emir said. “Danielle Geller has those essences and knows how to use them well. Of course, you won’t be able to match her dimension essence. Even her family was lucky to get a hold of that.”

“I also have the balance essence,” Clive said. “My abilities are very spell-oriented and require more anticipation and timing than agility or martial ability. As a celestine, you can expect most of your abilities to be of the utility type, rather than spells or special attacks.”

“What kind of utility?” Belinda asked.

“As with everything else,” Clive said, “it depends on the essence and the awakening stone involved. With the swift essence you already have, Miss Wexler, you can expect movement abilities and effects conditional on mobility. The balance essence is trickier to predict. My powers, for example, are about balancing risk and reward, rather than finesse. Lady Geller, on the other hand, does require finesse, along with judgement and timing. The reward for all that challenge is abilities that can overturn a fight in an instant.”

“You’re saying skill abilities are better if you have skills,” Sophie said, “and simple abilities are better if you’re crap at everything.”

“That’s not exactly right,” Emir said. “Simple abilities are more useful in more situations. In most circumstances, the best solution is the simple one. If you’re building a team of adventurers, the last thing you want is to have a roster full of skill specialists. You mostly want people who have simple abilities and know how to leverage them effectively, with some high-skill people splashed in.”

“Take Jason as an example,” Rufus said. “He has to work harder to efficiently eliminate monsters most adventurers find easy. It takes him more skill and effort just to achieve the same result, let alone be better. His strength is handling monsters that many adventurers couldn’t beat at all. That makes him a valuable addition to a team with a preponderance of simple abilities, while he would have little to add to a team already loaded up with high-skill power sets.”

“So you’re highly skilled, are you?” Sophie asked Jason sceptically.

“I caught you,” he shot back.

“The effectiveness of any power set comes down to the user, whatever the power,” Emir said. “My abilities, for example, fall on the simple side of the scale. Some martial technique helps, but they are fast, powerful and useful in almost any scenario. Against someone who uses high-skill abilities, I need to pressure them so their abilities that are

hard to execute become impossible. If I succeed, I win. If I don't, the fight is turned around on me in a key moment and I lose."

"I think something that has been overlooked," Clive said, "is that every adventurer has a power set of twenty abilities. While most people tend to skew one way or the other on the skill-simplicity scale, very few are all simple or all skill-based. Even if you end up with a lot of high-skill abilities, you will likely have a handful of more straightforward ones. They won't be the most exciting, but you'll find yourself using them the most, leveraging them to set up your more specialised ones."

"He's right," Rufus said. "My more exotic powers tend to finish fights, but it's the simple and reliable ones that make that possible."

"You also need to understand that you don't really get a choice in which way you go," Clive said. "Randomness is inherent to awakening essence abilities. People with an excess of time and access to experts sometimes try and slant the results, but even the most expensive and laborious efforts have mixed results at best. Some people just end up with high-skill abilities, and an essence like balance makes it all the more likely."

"I will say this, though," Rufus said. "It's been my experience that people get the abilities to which they are naturally inclined."

"Yes," Emir agreed. "I have found that people are reflected in their power set. Mine, for example, is ostentatious yet effective. Rufus' is beautiful and dangerous. I don't really know about Jason and Mr Standish."

"Jason's powers are alternately deceitful and flashy, leading to a miserable, inexorable demise," Rufus said. "There's a recording floating around of him maniacally tormenting a group of powerful adventurers as he brings them prolonged, horrifying deaths."

Everyone turned to look at Jason.

"It was in a mirage chamber," he said. "None of them actually died."

"Something you need to understand," Emir told Sophie, "is that whatever the nature of your abilities, every essence combination is powerful in the right hands. We just need to find the right essences for your particular hands."

"He's right about every combination having the potential for greatness," Rufus said. "Even the ones you might dismiss. When I was a boy, a man came through my family's academy with the duck essence. Everyone thought he was a joke, myself included. I couldn't understand why my grandfather took this boy from the countryside and placed him in our school. I learned the hard way that if you know how to use it, every essence is a threat."

“That’s why I asked Rufus to be part of this,” Jason said. “He grew up watching people come into their abilities.”

“Jason has apprised us of your strengths,” Rufus said. “Mobility and fighting skill are where he said you excel.”

“You think you can judge me?” Sophie asked Jason, then turned to Rufus.

“Did he say I fight better than him?” she asked.

“He did,” Rufus said.

“Oh,” Sophie said. “Maybe he can judge me.”

“You’re being very rude to the people trying to be our benefactors,” Belinda said through gritted teeth.

“If politeness is where they draw the line, then they aren’t exactly reliable benefactors,” Sophie said.

“That’s an attitude I recognise,” Clive said, looking at Jason. Rufus agreed with a chuckling nod.

“If you’re confident you can develop the skills,” Emir said, pulling things back on topic, “then the balance essence might be a good fit.”

“Speed and skill are exactly what I’m looking for,” Sophie said.

“Alright,” Emir said. “That leaves one last essence. The adept essence is the obvious choice if skill is where you want to focus.”

“Rather than push harder into one aspect,” Rufus said, “it might be better to diversify. Something that still synergises while offering different kinds of abilities.”

“That’s a good point,” Emir said. “I’ve seen people who overspecialise and end up with five answers to one problem and no answers to the rest.”

“Wind essence,” Clive said confidently, tapping the list. “There’ll be at least one mobility power and it’ll be different from what the swift essence will give out. Some elemental control would definitely expand her power set, but wind will better match speed and skill than earth or fire would.”

“You make a compelling argument, Mr Standish,” Emir said and Rufus nodding his agreement.

“What confluence essence does the swift, balance and wind combination produce?” Rufus asked.

“Mystic,” Clive said, not bothering to look it up. “If you wanted something more aggressive, you could swap out balance for a might essence it would produce the onslaught confluence.”

“Not a good idea,” Rufus said. “Onslaught is best for humans with all those special attacks.”

“Not an option anyway,” Jason said. “Might essences get snapped up quickly, so there's none on our list.”

“Mystic is definitely the superior choice for a celestine,” Clive said. “Mystic can awaken some very interesting utility powers, in which they excel.”

“Mystic is a common confluence essence,” Rufus said. “That isn't just because so many combinations produce it, though. A lot of useful abilities come out of the mystic essence. It's an easy and effective choice, especially when you're working with common essences.”

“I have the mystic essence myself,” Emir said. “Staff, might, magic and mystic. All three of my combination essences are common. Two of those are highly sought after but still common, yet I've been nothing but happy with them.”

“Mr Bahadir is right,” Clive said. “The mystic essence is well known for producing the kind of abilities that are rare in other essences.”

“What kind of abilities would I get from these wind and mystic essences?” Sophie asked.

“Mystic is wide open,” Clive said. “The awakening stones you use would be the defining factor; similar to the balance essence, but even more so. As for the wind essence, you can expect something movement-related, as well as some kind of elemental control. Probably a combination of both. A flight power is quite likely.”

“A flight power?” Sophie asked.

“That's right,” Clive said.

“Flight, as in being able to fly?”

“That's how flight works, yes, Clive said.

“So that would be me, able to fly?”

“Yes. That would be you. Flying. With your flight power. That makes you fly. Am I overcomplicating this?”

“Seems straightforward to me,” Jason said. “Wish I'd known flying was on the table before I used the first essences I came across.”

“Just to be absolutely clear,” Sophie said, “I would have the power to fly.”

“You'd most likely be restricted to gliding at iron-rank,” Clive said. “Eventually, though, yes.”

Sophie and Belinda looked at each other, then back across the table.

“That's the one,” they said together.

“A definitive choice, if I’ve ever heard one,” Emir said with a chuckle.

“It has some other advantages, too,” Jason said. “The wind essence is common, but not as sought-after as a magic or a might essence. It leaves room in the budget for some awakening stones.”

“I was looking at that list,” Rufus said, picking it up off the table. “There are some interesting common picks on here. An awakening stone of the eyes is a good shot at giving a perception power.”

“I was looking at this,” Clive said, pointing out an item on the list.

“A set of two awakening stones of the hand and two awakening stones of the foot,” Rufus read. “The price is right but I’m not so sure about those stones.”

“You said yourself that every ability is good in the right hands,” Clive said. “My understanding is that Miss Wexler is quite the pugilist. Many people look down on awakening stones of the hand, but they’re well-known for awakening empty-hand abilities and attacks. Miss Phoebe Geller used a number of them and was quite satisfied with the results. They’re exactly what an unarmed combatant wants in an awakening stone.”

“I’ve seen Phoebe Geller in action,” Jason said. “I saw her make elementals explode with a punch.”

“Awakening stones of the foot can also awaken unarmed attacks but also movement abilities and are similarly worthwhile to someone focused on unarmed combat,” Clive said. “To the right essence user, which I believe Miss Wexler is, this collection of stones is very underpriced. These four stones, plus the stone of eyes and she would be well on her way to establishing her ability set.”

Emir and Rufus looked at each other, then at Clive.

“Not bad, Mr Standish,” Emir said. “Not bad at all. Thoughts, ladies?”

“Sounds right,” Sophie said. “Moving, punching, kicking. Those are my areas of expertise.”

“That would be five abilities, plus the four from using the essences,” Jason said. “Almost half your abilities awakened out of the gate is pretty good. If that’s settled, then, I’ll go straight to making purchases. I’m not the only one bargain hunting, after all.”

He stood up, then looked at Sophie.

“I make a lot of money, but this still won’t be cheap for me. The next six months, you’ll be doing a lot of work to pay this back. A lot of work.”

“That may be the first thing I’ve heard you say that I’m halfway willing to trust,” Sophie said. Jason flashed her a grin.

“If you’re willing to trust me this early, you might not have been paying attention.”

He swept out of the room dramatically, Clive and Rufus shaking their heads.

“Do any of you understand that man?” Sophie asked in Jason’s absence.

“Definitely not,” Rufus said.

“I haven’t known him very long,” Emir added.

“I’m still unclear on why he accused me of sleeping with his wife,” Clive said. “He doesn’t have a wife. Neither do I, for that matter, which did not stop him from accusing himself of sleeping with her.”

Jason suddenly stuck his head around the door.

“I just remembered,” he said. “Not sure if anyone mentioned, but one of the perks of having a full essence set is you don’t have to poo anymore.” His head retracted as he set off down the hall again.

Emir, Rufus, Clive, Belinda and Sophie all looked at the empty doorway.

“I’m changing my answer,” Emir said, breaking the silence. “I’ve just now known him long enough to realise I absolutely do not understand him at all.”

Chapter 119: This is the Moment

The Adventure Society campus became a continual series of memorial services. There were so many dead that group memorials were being held one after another. First came the largest groups, made up of the least influential adventurers who had passed. The memorials took place on the north shore, where they could be easily overseen from the high terraces of the cloud palace. Gary and Rufus, as expedition members themselves, made their way out of the cloud palace to attend each and every one. Jason, Emir and the adventurers among Emir's staff could all be found on the terraces at various times, looking on at the sombre proceedings.

After the larger group memorials came the smaller ones, each of the most prominent families having a service for the people they lost. Jason and Emir attended the service for the Geller family and Jason for the Mercers. He stood close by Cassandra, who held his hand tightly. Thadwick didn't give Jason so much as a glance.

Rufus and Gary chose not to have Farrah memorialised until they took her home. Her casket was stowed away somewhere deep in the cloud palace. Rufus had notified her parents over water link, looking twice his age after. Neither Gary nor Rufus went back to the lodgings they had shared with Farrah. Jason went to settle accounts with Madam Landry and collect their things.

Before he took Sophie to perform her essence rituals, Jason took her and Belinda up to the terraces to see one of the memorials.

"Becoming an adventurer is an opportunity," he told them, "but it's also a danger."

"You think we don't know danger?" Sophie asked.

"Of course you do," Jason said. "You know the worst kind; the malevolence you can only find in people. Monsters are different. They don't hate you. They just want to kill you. An intelligent enemy can obsess over you. Pursue you relentlessly. But you can manipulate a malevolent enemy. You can reason with them, play on their fears and desires. That doesn't work on a monster. One of you is better at killing than the other and that is the only question between you. No hesitation, no doubt. It's a simpler danger than an avaricious crime lord but one that can't be talked down or negotiated with. A monster's only objective is to kill you."

The two women looked at Jason. He was leaning on the railing as he looked at the memorial below without really seeing it. He continued to talk, gaze still caught in the distance.

“This life can kill you without giving any recourse,” he said. “It can and does take even the best of us. Being an adventurer can give you everything you ever wanted. Wealth, respect, power. For some, that’s all there is. They take it all without paying the price, but they aren’t really adventurers.”

He tapped an arm on the terrace railing.

“You’ll see amazing things, like a palace made of clouds. On almost any given day, there’s no better life than being an adventurer. But there are some days, if you’re a real adventurer, where you earn all the others. You make the hard choices and put everything on the line. You walk through the fire so no one else has to.”

He finally turned to face the two women.

“Rufus gave me this speech the night before I got my completed my essence set, and now I’ve given it to you. You’ll have to choose for yourselves what kind of adventurers to be.”

“You don’t make being what you call a real adventurer sound very appealing,” Belinda said.

He gave them an odd smile, weary and a little sad, but with an underlying satisfaction.

“I wake up every morning, proud of who I am,” he told them. “I go out into the world, never regretting that I didn’t at least try and be the person I want to be. I face dangers and make mistakes. Sometimes I get beat, and sometimes I win. I stand up for what I believe in, whatever it costs me. When you give everything you have to be who you want to be, that’s freedom, whatever your circumstances.”

He turned his head to look down at the memorial currently happening below.

“If wealth and power are all you want,” he said, “then you can have them. Make all the safe choices and reap the rewards. Many adventurers do just that and, objectively, it’s the smart choice. But if you want to see who you really are, what you’re really capable of, you have to push yourself to the limit. There’s no better job for that than being an adventurer.”

Turned from the railing, looking at them straight on.

“You get the essences either way,” he said. “You have six months to decide what comes after. For now, Clive should have the room ready.”

On the way to one of Emir’s ritual rooms, they passed through one of the walkways connecting two wings of the palace. It was high up on the towers, spanning over the sea below. It was broad, with open-air sides and doubled as a garden. Flowering vines grew

directly out of the cloud-stuff, lush green leaves and bright blossoms lining the sides of the walkway. Jason laughed as they walk through it.

“I don’t think I’ve gone a day in this palace without a pleasant surprise,” he said.

“Good,” Belinda said. “It’s not just us, then.”

“How do you find your way around?” Sophie asked. “We’ve gotten lost more than once.”

“One of my abilities maps all the places I go,” Jason said absently as he stepped to smell the flowers. “Can you smell that? This is amazing.”

“You think flowers are amazing?” Sophie asked.

“He stores this entire palace in a bottle not much bigger than your head and still successfully cultivates flowers. Where’s your sense of wonder?”

“Speaking of scents,” Belinda said, “what’s the perfume you’re wearing?”

“I’m not wearing one,” Jason said.

“You don’t need to be embarrassed,” Belinda said. “Lots of men wear scents.”

“I’m not worried about being embarrassment,” Jason said. “I’m really not wearing a scent.”

“Humans don’t smell like that,” Belinda said. “Just a little bit of sweat and they smell like leather left in a damp cupboard. You smell more like an elf or a celestine, but even more so. Fresh, like, um...”

“Springtime,” Sophie said as Belinda searched for the right word.

“Yeah,” Belinda said, looking at Sophie with surprise. “That’s exactly it.”

“I’m not human,” Jason said. “This is just how I smell.”

He resumed his way along the cloudy garden path and Belinda shared a look with Sophie.

“He smells like springtime,” Belinda said.

“So what?” Sophie asked and followed after Jason.

The ritual room had the usual walls and ceiling made of cloud, but the floor was a single slab of black stone, cut perfectly level and smooth. Given that the room was around half the size of a basketball court, Jason was impressed. Clive was waiting for them, with a magic diagram drawn on the floor with lines of golden light.

“Clive is going to be doing the rituals,” Jason said. “We’d be here all day if it were me and he’s the expert, in any case.”

Clive's essence ability, Enact Ritual, made drawing-out and performing rituals much more convenient. Jason looked over the diagram, which had two magical circles partly

overlapping as its core. Jason's knowledge of ritual magic included several essence rituals, but this was more complicated than anything he knew.

"I thought essence rituals were meant to be the simplest ones," Jason said.

"This is a double-essence ritual circle," Clive explained. "The idea is that absorbing more essences at once promotes inter-essence synergy. It's yet to be proven effective due to our limited understanding of how abilities are selected, but it doesn't hurt to try."

"Two at once?" Sophie asked warily. "Will there be any side-effects?"

"None at all," Clive said. "In fact, while studies have never been able to prove an increase in synergy, they have discovered that simultaneous absorption alleviates the purging effect compared to sequential absorption."

"When you hit iron rank, your body will be improved through magic," Jason said. "Part of that improvement is dumping out all the bits it doesn't like in the form of gunk."

"Gunk?" Sophie asked.

"Lots of gunk," Clive confirmed and pointed over at the side of the room where there was a small door. "As soon as you've absorbed your essences, go straight through there before it hits you. Belinda, you should join her as she may pass out. There is a shower in there for once she's done, and Jason kindly provided some of his crystal wash supply that I also left in there. There is also an extensive closet, from which Mr Bahadir said you may take anything you like to keep."

"You might not even need the crystal wash," Jason said as Sophie and Belinda wandered over to take a look into the next room. There was a shower large enough to lay down in, plus benches and cabinets.

"The shower will probably be enough," Jason continued.

"That is a lie," Clive said. "You will absolutely need the crystal wash. Won't she, Jason?"

"Yes," Jason sullenly conceded.

"If you knew Jason," Clive said, "you would realise that he would rather part with those essences than his crystal wash. Speaking of which, do you have them?"

Jason took out the two essences had procured, along with five awakening stones, laying them all out on a bench sitting against the wall. The essences were cubes, shining with colour. The wind essence was a roiling mass of white mixed with streaks of pale grey and blue. The balance essence had its colours divided in a dead-straight line in the middle. The colours of each side constantly shifted in contrast to the other: Red and blue, black and white, green and purple. Most of the awakening stones were a plain peach colour by comparison, while the last looked like an oversized glass eye.

“That one’s kind of creepy,” Belinda said, looking at the eyeball one.

“How do we even know those are what they say they are?” Sophie asked.

“Really?” Belinda asked, turning on her. “Are trying to get them to change their minds?”

“I wouldn’t worry,” Jason said. “Clive takes his experiment subjects from villages in the delta where people will just assume a monster got them.”

“What?” Clive asked.

“We still don’t know why Asano is doing any of this,” Sophie said. “If he’s in this to help us, then why give me essences when throwing us through a portal would get us away from everything?”

“Sophie!” Belinda scolded.

“No,” Jason said, his voice suddenly hard and cold, arresting everyone’s attention. The signature amused insouciance fell from his expression, his relaxed posture becoming firm. He locked his eyes with Sophie across the chamber.

“It’s hard for you to trust,” he told her.

“So?” she said, glaring back.

“The real answer is half-measures. I agreed to help you. Sending you away to live the same lives again just leads you to the same end. If I’m going to save you, then you’re going to stay saved, which means that when I’m done with you, you need the means to protect yourselves.”

He arrived in front of the bench with the essences, placing a hand on each.

“In this world, that means essences,” he said, picking them up.

“They are the line between acting and being acted upon,” he continued as he walked back toward Sophie. “They are the difference between dominion and obedience. Justice and iniquity. Controlling your destiny and being a pawn of fate.”

He held the essences out in front of her.

“Why doesn’t matter,” he said. “All that matters is the choice you make, right now. Sometimes the moments that define our lives go unnoticed until later. This is not one of those. I am offering you the chance to literally grasp your destiny. Take it or walk away, knowing that this is the moment in which everything that comes after is decided.”

He stood there, still holding out the essences.

Sophie looked at the essences in his hands, then up at his face. He gave her a goofy grin.

“What are you?” she asked him. “A fool? A madman? A liar playing games only he can see?”

“Yes,” he told her, eyes sparkling. “I once met a woman who thought that essences shape who you are but she was wrong. Essences are power, and power doesn’t change you. It reveals you. Give someone the power to be who they always wanted and you will see who they always wanted to be. This is who I am, good and bad. This is your chance to be who you want to be, not who you have to be to survive.”

Her response came in a soft voice; the first time Jason has seen her vulnerable.

“I don’t know who I am without that.”

“Do you want to find out?” he asked gently.

She nodded, placing her hands on the essences he was still holding out for her.

Chapter 120:

Iron Rank

In the ritual room, Clive was rubbing his hands together.

“Now for the good part,” he said.

“The good part?” Belinda asked.

“Jason has an ability that he shamelessly squanders,” Clive said. “He could be a one-man revolution in how we categorise powers but he refuses to come and work for the Magic Society.”

“That would be the Magic Society run by the guy who wanted Miss Wexler for what I can only assume to be a creepy love dungeon?” Jason asked.

“Oh,” Clive said, looking between Sophie and Belinda. “I’m probably not going to sell you on the virtue of the Magic Society then.”

“Not likely, no,” Sophie said. She was still holding the two essences she had accepted from Jason.

“Hold on,” Clive said, turning to Belinda. “Why did you accept the job as my assistant, then?”

“To find out more about Lamprey, obviously. Also, it sounded pretty interesting and no one is looking to put me in a... love dungeon.”

“I guess Jory didn’t show you all the renovations,” Jason said, which got a laugh from Sophie. Jason’s head swivelled around to look at her in surprise.

“What?” Sophie asked.

“I’ve never heard you laugh before,” Jason said.

“You have a problem with the way I laugh?”

“Not at all,” he said. “It’s just that our normal interactions range from you saying you don’t trust me to you kicking me in the head.”

“She’s like that with everyone,” Belinda said.

“I guarantee you that Jason’s worse to deal with,” Clive said.

“How am I worse? I’m affable. And I didn’t just make up that kicking me in the head thing.”

“He’s definitely worse,” Clive said to Belinda. “You have no idea what he put me through when we first met.”

“Jory told me to do it,” Jason said.

“He told you to tell your landlady that I slept with the wife you don’t have?”

“He left the specifics to me, but yeah.”

“Why would he do that?” Clive asked.

“You were investigating me for forging spirit coins or whatever.”

“You made counterfeit coins too?” Belinda asked Jason.

“Wait,” Clive said, turning to Belinda. “You made counterfeit spirit coins?”

“Er... no.”

“I think it’s time to use that ability, Clive,” Jason said. He opened his contacts list, selected Sophie, Belinda and Clive and sent party invites.

➤ You have received a party invitation from [Jason Asano]. Accept Y/N?

Sophie and Belinda were startled by the sudden appearance of screens in front of them. Belinda started waving her hand in the air in front of her.

“Party invitation?” she asked. “Like where everyone dresses up?”

“More like where people form a group to go fight a monster,” Jason said. “This is an ability I have that I can share with other people. It lets you know things about the world.”

“What kind of things?” Sophie asked.

“Accept the invitation and find out.”

She barely hesitated before nodding, to Jason’s relief. Sophie was like an alley cat that had been kicked so many times it didn’t trust you when you tried to feed it. Shortly afterwards she was staring wide-eyed at one of the essences in her hands.

Item: [Wind Essence] (unranked, common)

Manifested essence of the wind (consumable, essence).

- Requirements: Less than 4 absorbed essences.
- Effect: Imbues 1 awakened wind essence ability and 4 unawakened wind essence abilities.
- You have absorbed 1/4 essences. Once absorbed, an essence cannot be relinquished or replaced.

“I don’t see anything,” Belinda said and Jason offered her his hand to shake. As they touched, a window appeared in front of her.

-
- Jason Asano (outworlder).
 - Essence User (iron rank).
-

“One of the features is that you can identify things by touch. You don’t get much from people, but it’s useful for items.”

He looked over at Clive with a frown.

“As you can see.”

Clive was pulling a series of racks out of his storage space, laden with items. He started picking them up, one by one, scribbling in a notebook in between.

“Clive,” Jason said.

“Yeah?” Clive asked absently, not looking up from what he was doing.

“Did you save a up a bunch of items you wanted to catalogue until they next time we were in a party?”

“I figured if I asked, you’d say no.”

“Of course I’d say no.”

“That’s why I thought to myself: ‘what would Jason do?’ Obviously, he’d just do it without asking and then point out that no one said he couldn’t.”

“That’s what I’d do, is it?”

“Of course it is,” Clive said. “Also, I’d like to point out that no one said I couldn’t.”

Jason groaned.

“Look, we need to get on with this ritual,” he said. “Pack it up for now and you can do some more while she’s recovering before we move onto awakening stones.”

“You promise you’ll let me finish at the end?” Clive asked.

“Yeah, alright,” Jason conceded. “It’s not like I actually have to do anything. I just don’t want you treating me like I’m administration software.”

Jason looked at the racks of items Clive had pulled out.

“Do you even have time to be doing this? I was surprised you even agreed to help with the essence ritual. I thought you’d be neck-deep in what they brought back from the expedition by now.”

“I won’t be allowed to see it for at least a few days,” Clive said as the racks started vanishing back into his dimensional space. “Whoever figures out what they were after will look very good in the eyes of the wider Magic Society. Lucian Lamprey is motivated entirely by personal benefit and I’m the son of eel farmers. First look at what they brought back goes to the Magic Society members he wants favours from.”

The mention of Lamprey arrested Sophie and Belinda’s attention.

“I think you may have extended the definition of benefits in an unsavoury direction,” Belinda said.

“Do you think your colleagues will find the answer?” Jason asked.

“Highly unlikely,” Clive said. “Greenstone’s Magic Society is almost as rotten as its Adventure Society. It’s basically a social club for people who like magic toys, with only a handful of genuine researchers. There aren’t a lot of experts per field and I suspect it will require actual expertise in astral magic. Aside from me, the only other astral magic scholar in Greenstone was Landemere Vane. Who you killed.”

“That sounds a little accusatory,” Jason said.

“It would have been nice if you had killed someone stupid. He was a capable magical scholar.”

“He didn’t list his accreditations before trying to kill and eat me.”

“Did you just say eat?” Belinda asked.

“I certainly did,” Jason said. “You two don’t have a monopoly on being caught in bad situations.”

While Clive put away the racks of paraphernalia, Jason moved over to Sophie. She was still staring at the essences in her hands with fascination.

“Now you know,” he said.

“Know what?” she asked, looking up at him.

“How I see the world.”

“Is it like this for everyone, where you come from?”

“No. I lost my humanity when I came to this world. This is what I got in trade.”

She watched his expression as he looked at the essences in her hands. He was clearly caught up in some memory, his mask of perpetual amusement briefly absent.

“You’ve been through your own troubles, haven’t you?” she asked softly.

He looked up, flashing her a grin as his usual visage returned.

“Nothing that rakish charm and dashing good looks couldn’t handle.”

She frowned, searching his face for something authentic.

“I can never tell what’s real with you,” she said. “I’ve known manipulators before. The good ones use vulnerability as a weapon.”

“When I first met Cassandra, I told her that there was only one way to use vulnerability as a weapon.”

“That was a lie.”

“Yes.”

“Leave her with a question and plant the seed of seduction,” Sophie said. “I’ve seen it work before.”

“It was just some flirty banter,” Jason said. “It wasn’t some kind of organised campaign.”

“Of course it wasn’t. Men like you try to turn the world into a story, even with friends and lovers. It’s like breathing; you don’t even realise you’re doing it.”

“You seem to think you know me pretty well,” he said.

“I’ve known plenty like you. Some are subtle, others outrageous, like you. Keeping people off-balance so you can tip them over. You’re not special, Jason Asano.”

Clive had finished packing away his things. He stood with Belinda, observing Jason and Sophie across the room. They couldn’t hear the softly worded exchange but watched their body language. They stood right in each other’s faces, neither looking away. Their bodies had confrontational stances but were close together, the cubes in Sophie’s hands filled most of the space between them.

“That’s trouble,” Clive said to Belinda.

“Yep,” she agreed.

“I hope Jason doesn’t do something stupid.”

“If he doesn’t keep his hands to himself, she’ll break them.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Clive said. “Jason has very specific views on power relationships, and while his values might be strange, they’re important to him. He’s not Lucian Lamprey.”

“Then what kind of stupid are you talking about?”

“Look at the choices he made to get you here,” Clive said. “What iron-ranker would face down a silver in order to turn a pair of thieves into adventurers?”

“I still don’t know why he would go this far for strangers. He made his big speech but that felt more like he was telling a story than telling the truth.”

“Farrah,” Clive started, his throat catching. “I think she was the only one that really understood him.”

“That’s the woman that died?”

Clive nodded.

“When I first met Jason I wanted to understand him better. I mean, a man from another world. For an astral magic scholar like me it’s the opportunity of a lifetime. Farrah told me that under all the... Jason, he feels constantly exposed. Beset on all sides by powers that could easily destroy him.”

“I know that feeling,” Belinda said.

“And he recognises that. It’s why he wants to help.”

“It’s that simple?”

“He has bit of a hero complex.”

“That kind of thing gets people killed,” Belinda said.

“Probably,” Clive said. “But where would you be right now if he didn’t have it?”

Clive left Belinda at the edge of the room, moving up to the magic diagram. He directed Jason to get out of the way with Belinda and Sophie to step into the magic circle. He had her hold her hands out from her sides with an essence cube in each hand. He took out a magic wand and started waving it like he was conducting an orchestra. The air in the room started to stir, centred on the diagram and Sophie within it. It swirled around her, whipping her silver ponytail.

“Is this how your’s went?” Belinda asked Jason, quiet, so as to not interrupt.

“I didn’t have an essence ritual,” Jason said. “I just absorbed my essences with my vast magical powers.”

“Because you’re some weirdo from another world?”

“Pretty much,” Jason said, wondering once again how accurate his translation power was.

The wind was continuing to pick up as it stormed about in the enclosed ritual chamber. There was a sonorous hum and they could feel a prickling on their skin. The sharp taste of ozone filled their mouths. Light from the magic diagram on the floor started floating up in golden motes, drawn into the two essences cubes. As the light sank into them, the essences started shedding dust that floated into the air, also faintly glowing. Slowly at first, then with increasing pace, the essences dissolved, riding the wind to shroud Sophie in a magical squall. Rainbow light started appearing in the squall, sinking into Sophie’s obscured body.

The last of the essences turned to glowing dust, swirling around Sophie. Suddenly the wind stopped dead and the glowing dust stopped glowing, dropping to the ground. The magic circle faded as the now powerless dust scattered across the stone floor.

-
- Party member [Sophie Wexler] has absorbed [Wind Essence]. [Sophie Wexler] has absorbed 2 of 4 essences.
 - Progress to iron rank: 50% (2/4 essences).
 - [Wind Essence] has bonded to the [Power] attribute, changing [Power] from normal to [Iron 0]. Master all wind essence abilities to increase the [Power] attribute.
 - You have awakened the wind essence ability [Wind Blade]. 1 of 5 wind essence abilities have been awakened.
-

“I love this part,” Clive said.

-
- Party member [Sophie Wexler] has absorbed [Balance Essence]. [Sophie Wexler] has absorbed 3 of 4 essences.
 - Progress to iron rank: 75% (3/4 essences).
 - [Balance Essence] has bonded to the [Recovery] attribute, changing [Recovery] from normal to [Iron 0]. Master all balance essence abilities to increase the [Recovery] attribute.
 - You have awakened the balance essence ability [Equilibrium]. 1 of 5 balance essence abilities have been awakened.
-

“That didn’t feel bad at all,” Sophie said.

“Essence rituals are very gentle,” Clive said. “It’s only if you shove the essence inside yourself without one that the experience is a harsh one.”

“You’re just bitter that you didn’t get to see me do it,” Jason said.

“That’s true,” Clive said as he read the description of Sophie’s first new power.

Ability: [Wind Blade] (Wind)

- Special attack.
 - Cost: Low mana.
 - Cooldown: None.
 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)
 - Effect (iron): Create a cutting projectile of air.
-

“Special attack,” Clive said. You probably won’t get many, so each one is valuable.”

Ability: [Equilibrium] (Balance)

- Special ability.
 - Cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.
 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)
 - Effect (iron): Meditate to slowly accrue instances of [Integrity], up to an instance threshold based on the [Recovery] attribute. Instances quickly drop off when meditation ends.
 - [Integrity] (heal-over-time, mana-over-time, stamina-over-time, holy): Periodically recover a small amount of health, stamina and mana. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

“See, this is great,” Clive said, jotting in his notebook. “Jason, you really should be helping out the Magic Society with this ability. People have an instinctive sense of their

abilities, but they aren't always great at verbalising them. The time and inaccuracy this saves is fantastic."

"Eyes on the prize, Clive," Jason said.

"Right," Clive said, refocusing on Sophie. Three intangible, translucent cubes floated out of her body, interposing on one another until they formed a single cube floating in front of her. Still insubstantial, it had a vibrant blue colour.

"The confluence essence," Clive said. "Take it."

Sophie reached out and the intangible object became solid at her touch. It began dissolving into blue smoke in her hands, which seeped into her body until it was gone.

-
- Party member [Sophie Wexler] has absorbed [Mystic Essence]. [Sophie Wexler] has absorbed 4 of 4 essences.
 - Progress to iron rank: 100% (4/4 essences).
 - [Mystic Essence] has bonded to the [Spirit] attribute, changing [Spirit] from normal to [Iron 0]. Master all mystic essence abilities to increase the [Spirit] attribute.
 - You have awakened the mystic essence ability [Strong Soul]. 1 of 5 mystic essence abilities have been awakened.

"Strong soul sounds good," Belinda said, reading the description.

Ability: [Strong Soul] (Mystic)

- Special ability (dimension).
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)
- Effect (iron): Disruptive-force damage dealt to you reduced by a large amount; other damage dealt to you is reduced by a small amount. Resistance to dimensional and astral effects and energies is increased. You can physically interact with incorporeal entities.

"How does having a strong soul make you take less damage?" Belinda asked.

"My advice is to just be glad it does," Jason said. "My damage reduction power is stabbing them in the back. How do you feel, Wexler?"

Sophie was still reading the last system message.

-
- You have absorbed 4/4 essences.
 - All your attributes have reached iron rank.

 - You have reached iron rank.
 - You have gained damage reduction against normal-rank damage sources.
 - You have gained increased resistance to normal-rank effects.
 - You have gained the ability to sense auras.
 - You have gained the ability to sustain yourself using sources of concentrated magic.
-

She stood awestruck in the middle of the chamber, rubbing one hand over the back of the other, feeling her skin.

“This feels incredible,” she said, her usual undertone of cynicism completely absent.

“You need to go into the side room,” Clive told her.

“What?” She asked, looking over at him, distracted.

“The side room,” Clive repeated. “Now.”

“I feel fine,” Sophie said. “Better than fine.”

“Give it a moment,” Jason said, stepping up next to Clive.

“I don’t see what you’re...”

Sophie’s words cut off as her face went pale. She sprinted for the side room, slamming a hand on the golden mark that opened the door. She rushed inside and the others heard her violently throwing up.

“I’ll go check on her,” Belinda said.

Chapter 121: Getting Stoned

Sophie and Belinda emerged from the side room, Sophie wearing a fresh outfit.

"That was deeply unpleasant," Sophie said, still looking peaky.

"I imagine Jason had it worse," Clive said. "He's an outworlder who came here before ever getting an essence."

"Why does that matter?" Belinda asked.

"He made his body from the most diluted and impure magic. He was basically a human-shaped lesser monster."

"That's a little blunt," Jason said.

"Because his body was so full of impurities, his purgation when he ranked up would have been very extreme."

"It certainly wasn't fun," Jason said.

"What do you mean by 'he made his body'?" Belinda asked.

Jason and Clive shared a glance.

"That's probably best left for another day," Clive said.

"Not an explanation that benefits from brevity," Jason agreed. "Suffice to say, my ascension to iron rank was a messy and profoundly awful experience."

"Sophie made quite a mess herself," Belinda said. "Good thing this whole place cleans itself because I wouldn't wish that on anyone. All the muck just sank into the floor."

"Mine was still worse," Jason said. "I completely passed out."

"Are you sure you weren't just weak?" Sophie asked him.

"Yes," Jason said. "I was, but it wasn't just that."

"How about we get started?" Clive asked. He had already used his abilities to purge the lingering magic from the previous ritual and draw a new circle on the floor. "Unlike the essences, we'll have to go through the awakening stones one at a time. It's a quick and simple ritual, though."

It was as simple as promised, starting with the awakening stone of eyes.

-
- You have awakened the mystic essence ability [Sight Beyond Sight]. You have awakened 2 of 5 mystic essence abilities.

Ability: [Sight Beyond Sight] (Mystic)

- Special ability (perception).
 - Cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

 - Effect (iron): Perceive auras.
-

“A perception power,” Clive said. “It’s what we expected, but welcome, all the same.”

Sophie was disoriented at the influx of new stimuli. Her iron-rank ability to sense auras was only minutes old and had now erupted with sensitivity. She could not only see the auras of Belinda, Jason and Clive but feel them with all her senses. She could taste the auras around her, feel them on her skin.

Belinda’s aura was weak, with strange flavours Sophie couldn’t make sense of. It felt like spying on her friend’s thoughts and she instinctively withdrew her senses. Instead, she turned them on Jason and Clive. Their auras were much more controlled, nothing escaping the way it did with Belinda.

The aura of each man had a strange and powerful feel to them. Clive’s aura felt like a wellspring of magical power. Jason’s felt more dangerous; oppressive and controlling.

“Something wrong?” Jason asked as she stared at him.

“I was looking at your auras,” she told him and nodded at Clive. “I like his more.”

The remaining stones were the two awakening stones of the hand and the two of the foot.

“I recommend we start with the stones of the hand,” Clive said. “As you use more awakening stones, the abilities awakened will increasingly fill in the gaps of your power set. If the stones of the hand give you unarmed combat abilities, the stones of the foot are less likely to do so. There’s more chance they’ll give movement abilities instead.”

“That sounds fine,” Sophie said.

“I can’t make any promises, though,” Clive said.

“Understood,” she said.

Clive purged the ambient magic and set up a new circle.

-
- You have awakened the mystic essence ability [Immortal Fist]. You have awakened 3 of 5 mystic essence abilities.

Ability: [Immortal Fist] (Mystic)

- Special ability.
 - Cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

 - Effect (iron): Unarmed attacks deal additional resonating-force damage, which is highly effective against physical defences. Suffer no damage from making unarmed strikes against objects and negate all damage from actively intercepted attacks. Not all damage from very powerful or higher-ranked attacks will be negated.
-

“Another mystic essence ability,” Clive said. “It’s quite unusual to awaken the confluence essence abilities first.”

“Is that bad?” Belinda asked.

“No, just interesting,” Clive said. “There’s a theory that our personalities have a large impact on the kinds of abilities we awaken.”

“That’s a little worrying,” Jason said, considering his own abilities.

“Some advocates of this theory suggest that people with a very strong sense of self awaken the confluence essence abilities first, although I find the evidence to support that idea rather questionable.”

“Asano,” Sophie said. “Hit me with a weapon.”

“Wait, what?” Belinda asked.

“Read her ability,” Jason said. “It negates the damage from incoming attacks.”

“Reading is all well and good,” Belinda said. “Trying to catch a sword is another thing altogether.”

“I have to test the ability sooner or later,” Sophie said.

“Then I vote later!”

“Now is best,” Jason said, pulling out his magical sword. “I have healing potions on hand.”

“That’s a handsome sword,” Sophie said.

Jason held it out for her to take. She drew it halfway out of the scabbard as she examined it. With Jason’s party interface in effect, she was able to read the description.

Item: [Dread Salvation] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

- *A sword crafted with gratitude, in hope it would be of the greatest use in the moment of greatest need. It was forged with passion and expertise to be a reliable companion, bestowing upon it an incredible potential (weapon, sword).*

“A friend made it for me,” Jason said. “It’s my most treasured possession.”

“I’m still not convinced about this idea,” Belinda said.

“I told you,” Jason said. “If anything goes wrong, I’ve got healing potions.”

Sophie handed the sword back and, after confirming she was ready, Jason drew it and slashed out at her. She unhesitatingly blocked the attack with a palm strike, the sword bouncing back like it had struck a wall.

Everyone looked at Sophie’s hand, which was completely unharmed.

“Nice,” Jason said.

“Didn’t even hurt,” Sophie said. “Keep going.”

Jason unleashed a series of sword attacks, which Sophie intercepted with forearms, shins, shoulders and even a head-butt. She took several superficial cuts as she got a handle on the ability, but urged Jason to continue.

“I’ll need to adjust my fighting style for this,” she said.

“That’s normal,” Clive said. “An adventurer who doesn’t adjust the way they fight to their powers is a bad adventurer.”

“How do you fight?” Sophie asked him.

“From far away,” Clive said. “An adaptation in approach I was more than happy to make.”

“Looks like your ability doesn’t just protect your body,” Jason said. “Your clothes were only cut when you failed to intercept the hit.”

Sophie looked down at her clothes where blood was leaking from several slices in the fabric.

“You’re right,” she said.

“You said something about healing potions?” Belinda said.

“I’d like to try something first,” Jason said and looked at Sophie. “You up for it?”

“I can take anything you’ve got.”

“Alright. I’m going to throw out a special attack.”

He lashed out with his sword again and she intercepted it with a fist.

-
- [Celestine] has negated all damage from special attack [Punish].
 - Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on [Celestine].
-

"Interesting," Jason said.

Sophie frowned at the message in front of her.

- Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on you.
-

"You inflicted me with sin," Sophie said. "That better not be a sex thing."

"You completely negated the damage on my physical attack," Jason told her. "Even the magical damage. The non-damage effect still went through, though."

"What is that non-damage effect?" Belinda asked.

"A curse."

"A curse," Sophie said, glaring daggers.

"A minor curse," Jason said. "It won't do anything unless I use more special attacks on her. Also, I can just take it away."

"So take it away!" Belinda demanded.

"No worries," Jason said and pointed an arm at Sophie.

"Feed me your sins."

Sophie's life force radiated out from her body as a vibrant red glow. A dark stain swam within it but was drawn out, floating through the air and vanishing into Jason's outstretched hand. The glowing life force withdrew back into her body and he tossed her a healing potion from his inventory. She drank it, making a sour face.

"Those cheap potions of Jory's get the job done," she said. "I cannot get used to that taste, though."

Clive set up another ritual and Sophie absorbed the next awakening stone of the hand.

-
- You have awakened the mystic essence ability [Radiant Fist]. You have awakened 4 of 5 mystic essence abilities.

Ability: [Radiant Fist] (Mystic)

- Special ability.
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Unarmed attacks deal additional disruptive-force damage, which is highly effective against magical defences and intangible or incorporeal enemies. Unarmed attacks do not trigger retaliation effects. Negate any non-damage effects from actively intercepted attacks.

“Mystic essence again,” Jason said. “It’s a magic version of the last ability.”

“That’s useful,” Clive said. “The damage types of those two abilities, resonating-force and disruptive-force. Between them, you’ll get through almost any defence. They’re special abilities rather than special attacks, so I imagine the damage is limited, but they will be effective against any enemy you can put a hand to.”

“Try that special attack again,” Sophie said and Jason pulled his sword back out.

-
- [Celestine] has negated all damage from special attack [Punish].
 - Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on [Celestine].
 - [Celestine] has prevented secondary effects of special attack [Punish].
 - [Sin] does not take effect.

 - Affliction negation has triggered an effect on weapon [Dread Salvation].
 - [Celestine] has negated the triggered effect.

“Wow,” Jason said. “That even stopped my sword from buffing itself.”

“It seems clear the direction her abilities are taking her,” Clive said. “Of her first seven abilities, three are defensive and one is self-recovery. They aren’t blanket defence powers, though; they take skill to use effectively. She’s developing an evasion-type defensive specialist power set.”

“A dodge tank,” Jason said.

“There are, broadly speaking, two kinds of defence specialist,” Clive said. “They directly conflate with the two kinds of essence users we were discussing yesterday. The most common type uses raw toughness, heavy on simple, passive abilities that mitigate damage. Their strengths are standing their ground and withstanding punishment.

“And I’m the other type,” Sophie said.

“It looks that way,” Clive said. “You can expect more active defensive powers and more mobility. You won’t be as good at holding a fixed position but you’ll have the tools to be exactly where you need to be, exactly when you need to be there. You won’t be as good at passively taking hits, but you’ll be better at intercepting them. The other kind of specialist will outlast you under a barrage of attacks. More powerful, singular attacks can punch through their defences, though, while you’ll have to tools to avoid or negate them.”

“Sounds like you’ll be good at staying alive when things are at their worst,” Jason said.

“I always have been,” Sophie said.

Clive set up the next ritual, moving on to an awakening stone of the foot.

-
- You have awakened the balance essence ability [Cloud Step]. You have awakened 2 of 5 balance essence abilities.

Ability: [Cloud Step] (Balance)

- Special ability (movement).
- Cost: Low stamina and mana.
- Cooldown: 20 seconds.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Take a single step on air as if it were solid ground, becoming intangible for a brief moment. This ability can be used while all steps are on cooldown at an extreme mana cost per step. If used within mist, fog or cloud, this ability has no cooldown.

“Finally not a mystic one,” Jason said. “Kind of a shame at this point. You’ve almost fully awakened that essence.”

“What’s a cooldown?” Belinda asked, reading the ability description.

“That’s how long you have to wait after using an ability before you can use it again,” Jason said.

“It’s terminology from Jason’s world,” Clive said. “His ability serves as a guide for him to our world, so it describes them in ways he will best understand.”

“Why would she have to wait?” Belinda asked.

“Our bodies serve as a medium for the magic of our essence abilities,” Clive said. “Using the same magic in the same way repeatedly can over-stress the body. Less imposing abilities require little or no time before they can be used again, while more excessive powers require more time for recovery. This ability of yours, Miss Wexler is rather interesting in that you can circumvent this limitation using large amounts of mana.”

"Is that unusual?" Jason asked.

"Yes, but far from unheard of," Clive said. "It functions by spreading the strain across your body, which allows use in rapid succession but requires much more mana to push through. Very inefficient, but inefficient is better than unavailable in a critical moment."

"Try it out," Belinda said.

Sophie trod on an invisible step, then fell back to the floor.

"It seems underwhelming," Belinda said.

"I want to try the intangible thing," Jason said pulling a small pouch from his inventory. "Try your ability again."

Sophie used her ability to step on the air as Jason threw a glazed nut. It bounced off her forehead, earning Jason a glare.

"The ability does say briefly intangible," Jason said. "I think we need to get the timing right. Can you feel being intangible?"

"I think so," Sophie said. "There's a very brief sensation of lightness."

After several more attempts, they finally got a glazed nut to pass through Sophie's intangible body, right at the moment she took a step on the air.

"I wonder what happens if she uses it while standing on the ground," Jason said. "Would she fall through?"

"Not through the cloud palace," Clive said. "One of its many properties is to block the passage of intangible entities. She might go through the stone floor of this room, though."

The ritual room had a stone floor made from a single sheet of smoothly polished rock, to facilitate drawing ritual circles. After some experiments, they discovered that Sophie would sink into it if she had a foot on the ground while using the ability. After the fleeting moment of intangibility, her foot was pushed back out of the stone.

"You'd have to be moving fast but you could use that to get through a wall," Belinda said. "You have maybe a second of being intangible. You'd have to be moving fast enough to get most of the way through so you'd be pushed to the other side."

"I'm not sure I like the sound of that test," Sophie said. "What if I get stuck halfway through?"

"Your foot got pushed out of the floor," Belinda said. "There's no reason to think a wall would be any different."

"What happened to the woman who didn't want me catching swords?" Sophie asked.

"There are healing potions," Belinda said.

"I don't think a healing potion will fix my head occupying the same space as a chunk of wall."

“We can take a look at the possibilities later,” Clive said. “We have more rituals to perform.”

“In a little bit,” Sophie said. “I want to see what this ability can do. Asano, spar with me for a bit.”

Jason and Sophie engaged in some light sparring, neither pushing too hard. In the fighting pits, acrobatically using her speed and the walls to outmanoeuvre her opponents was her signature. She started using her new ability as a wall to kick-off whenever she needed. It wasn't wildly effective right away, but she saw the potential. Eventually, she begged-off with a splitting headache and Jason handed her a mana potion.

“Is that your first low-mana headache?” Jason asked.

She sighed with relief as the potion took effect, then nodded.

“Not pleasant, are they?”

“No, they are not,” she agreed, rubbing her temples.

“Do you want to take a break?” Clive asked.

“I'm fine,” she said.

“Take the break,” Belinda scolded. “You don't have to tough everything out on principle.”

“It's past time for lunch anyway,” Jason said. “I have sandwiches.”

On the bench where the last awakening stone was still waiting to be used he set out a lunch spread. A tray of sandwiches, plus glasses and a pitcher of iced tea, complete with chunks of ice floating in it.

“Do you always carry around sandwiches?” Belinda asked as Jason poured out drinks.

“He does,” Clive said, taking a sandwich from the tray. “Also, a rope ladder.”

Sophie wandered over last and Belinda shoved a sandwich in her hand.

“Where did you get this chutney?” Belinda asked Jason after biting into her own sandwich.

“My landlady makes it. Now that Emir has set us up in the cloud palace, I don't see her, which is a shame. I learned a lot about local ingredients in her kitchen. I went and packed-up the rooms my friends and I were renting and she stocked me up on chutney and jam. I've been meaning to figure out how you cook things in a kitchen made of clouds and knock out some sweet scones.”

Belinda chatted with Jason and Clive while Sophie ate in silence. Belinda occasionally glanced her way, noting that Sophie put an end to a good portion of the sandwiches. As Jason packed away the remains of their lunch, Clive set up the ritual for

the last awakening stone.

- You have awakened the mystic essence ability [Mirage Step]. You have awakened 5 of 5 mystic essence abilities.
- You have awakened all mystic essence abilities. Linked attribute [Spirit] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank mystic essence ability.
- You have 1 of 4 completed essences.

Ability: [Mirage Step] (Mystic)

- Special ability (dimension, movement, illusion).
 - Cost: Low stamina and mana.
 - Cooldown: 40 seconds.
 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)
 - Effect (iron): Move instantaneously to a nearby location, leaving an afterimage behind.
-

“Instantaneous movement,” Clive said. “It’s functionally similar to a teleport, but requires a path of traversal.”

“Teleporting can be tricky,” Jason said. “It took me a long time before I was able to successfully...”

Sophie suddenly appeared next to him

“...activate the ability,” he finished. “Never mind, I guess.”

A shimmering afterimage lingered briefly in Sophie’s original position before vanishing. As for Sophie herself, she was reeling, unbalanced.

“That was amazing,” Sophie said as she dizzily held her arms out. “That felt absolutely incredible. I’m going to need some practice, though. That was the last of the awakening stones, so I should do that.”

“Actually,” Jason said, “Clive and I managed to rustle up some extras yesterday.”

He walked over to the bench. It was now empty of awakening stones, but he took out two more and placed them down.

“One of these I got from the Adventure Society for catching you. The other I got from... somewhere else, but also for catching you.”

“Somewhere else?” Belinda asked.

Jason didn’t respond to the question. Clive took out a third stone, placing it with the other two.

“This is the one I got for catching you,” he said. “Jason doesn’t have his full set of essences but he’s close. Since he’s waiting for what Emir is setting up, he decided to give these to you.”

“What about you?” Belinda asked.

“I’ve had my full set for a long time,” Clive said. “I was just never much of an adventurer.”

Jason slapped him on the back.

“You killed a bronze rank monster in a hidden fortress under a swamp,” Jason said. “You’re a plenty good adventurer, now.”

“Last night, after our meeting, we were belatedly contacted by the Adventure Society about the reward for catching you,” Clive said. “I was going to give my stone to Jason but since he was giving his to you, I decided to the same.”

“What kinds of awakening stones are they?” Sophie asked. She walked up to the bench, looking at the stones. Jason gestured at them invitingly.

“Touch them and see.”

Chapter 122: Children

Sophie brushed a hand over the first of the three awakening stones Clive and Jason had laid out on the bench.

Item: [Awakening Stone of Focus] (unranked, uncommon)

An awakening stone containing an undistracted power. (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
- Effect: Awakens an essence ability.
- You have 11 unawakened essence abilities.

“That is the most common of the three,” Clive said. “The Magic Society grades stones on a scale of one to five stars, based on how frequently they are known to appear world-wide. We work with brokers and the Adventure Society to try and catalogue them all. Jason’s ability also seems to grade them into five stages of rarity, but not numerically. The stones you’ve used thus far were all common, or one star. Uncommon is two star.”

Sophie touched the next stone, with was blue with streaks of white.

Item: [Awakening Stone of the Sky] (unranked, epic)

An awakening stone containing the freedom of the open sky. (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
- Effect: Awakens an essence ability.
- You have 11 unawakened essence abilities.

“Epic,” she said.

“Four star, the second highest rarity,” Clive explained. “After it took so long to catch you, the Adventure Society raised the reward to a four star awakening stone for each person on the team that caught you.”

“They had to make it a limit of six after people started forming giant groups,” Jason said.

“After we caught you,” Clive said, “there were some issues, as you may recall. Jason and I collected our rewards yesterday evening and we were given a selection of four-star stones.

“The second-highest rarity,” Belinda said. “Are they the kind of stones you used?”

“Actually, I used all one and two star stones,” Clive said. “I was given an epic four-star essence, however. A rune essence. Very valuable.”

“Who gave you that?” Jason asked. “There can’t be a lot of epic essences in an eel farm.”

“My mentor,” Clive said. “He was the director the Magic Society; the predecessor to Lucian Lamprey’s predecessor. He took me out of the delta, gave me an education. Showed me the value of what we do at the Magic Society. I became an adventurer just in time for the last monster surge, when I was sixteen. He died during the surge and after it was over I never tried my hand at adventuring again until just recently. I threw myself completely into the Magic Society, but our branch here isn’t the same as it was back then.”

“I don’t imagine Lamprey fostering a positive institutional culture,” Jason said.

“No,” Clive said. “I’d say the one before wasn’t any better, but Lamprey really does set a new low.”

“I’m not even in the Magic Society and I know that much,” Belinda said.

Jason turned his attention back to the stones.

“Stone of the sky, he said. “I considered picking that one and using it myself.”

“It’s very highly sought after,” Clive said. “The chances of awakening some kind of flight power are very good. I’m a little surprised our Adventure Society here had one.”

“Turns out I already have a flight power,” Jason said. “Clive told me. I’m super looking forward to it, now, but it won’t let me fly until silver rank.”

“Jason has a number of abilities we have very little information on,” Clive said. “We do have thorough records on a number of them, however, and his cloak ability will let him glide at bronze rank and fly at silver. It won’t be as effective as a more dedicated movement power but he will fly.”

“I should probably look up what my abilities do at later ranks,” Jason said.

Clive turned on him in disbelief.

“That’s what I’ve been telling you!”

“Are you sure?” Jason asked. “Doesn’t ring a bell.”

As Clive started turning red, Jason turned to Sophie.

“Clive picked this one, in the end, since we were giving them to you. It’s your best bet at a flying power.”

“There are no guarantees, though,” Clive said, still glaring at Jason. “It could just as easily give you a special attack effective against enemies in the air.”

“Don’t be a downer, Clive,” Jason said.

“I’m just managing expectations,” Clive said. “Take a look at the last stone and then we’ll begin.”

Sophie reached out and touched the last stone, which was clear with such clarity as to be hard to see.

Item: [Awakening Stone of Purgation] (unranked, epic)

An awakening stone possessed of a cleansing power. (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
- Effect: Awakens an essence ability.
- You have 11 unawakened essence abilities.

“This will almost certainly give you some kind of cleansing ability,” Clive said. “You don’t have any obvious essences for it, so it could come in many forms. It might be a balance ability that transfers afflictions to your enemies or a swift ability that lets you recover from afflictions faster. It might be some other ability with a self-cleanse as a secondary effect.”

“How valuable are these epic stones?” Belinda asked.

“Each of them is more valuable than all the other stones put together,” Clive said. “The sky stone is more valuable than either of the essences you used.”

“And you’re just giving them to me?” Sophie asked.

“Your indenture contract is six months,” Jason said. “By the time it’s over, you’ll have been an adventurer for longer than I have, as of right now. You’ll earn them, believe me.”

“The question,” Clive said, “Is what order do you want to use them in? Do you want to start off with the potential flight power, or save that for the end?”

“Even if you get one,” Jason warned. “You probably won’t be able to fly well. My friend Humphrey can fly, but it costs him so much mana he can’t do it for long.”

Clive nodded.

“He’s right” Clive said. “At iron rank, the power will either be restricted by cost or the type of flight, like gliding. It will get cheaper or more useful as you rank up.”

“Speaking of which,” Jason said. “You didn’t use any monster cores to raise the ability you already have, right?”

“No,” Sophie said. “Before my father died, he left my one essence with Belinda’s father, who performed the ritual once I was old enough.”

“My dad didn’t have any essences himself, but he knew a good hodgepodge of different magical fields. He knew that monster cores would mess up her essence development and warned her off them,” Belinda said.

“Sounds like a good guy,” Clive said.

“He was a drunken prick whose sole act of decency was not selling off that essence before giving it to Sophie,” she said. “He tried to rob Cole Silva’s father and failed badly. Silva killed him and I was saddled with making restitution.”

“How do you know when you’re old enough to use an essence?” Jason asked. “Also, what happens if you try and you’re not old enough?”

“There’s a simple test for whether your body can handle it,” Clive said. “Usually that’s sixteen or seventeen, but I’ve heard of as low as fourteen and as late as nineteen or twenty. As for what happens if you aren’t ready, well, I’ve heard horror stories. Magical deformities. People using children in essence experiments to try and unlock the secrets of essences.”

Clive shook his head.

“Not every Magic Society branch is the best group of people, obviously,” he said. “Even the worst of us will put a stop to that, though.”

“Well, no worries here,” Belinda said. “Sophie’s practically a spinster.”

“I’m twenty three.”

“Me too,” Jason said. “Actually, it’s been about four months. I think I missed a birthday.”

“I’m going to set up the next ritual,” Clive said. “Pick which stone you want to use.”

“Do the sky stone last,” Belinda said. “If you actually get the power to fly, we can head straight out and try it.”

“Good idea,” Jason said. “Work your way up to the big finale.”

Sophie nodded and Clive got to work, quickly setting up and performing the ritual using the uncommon stone of focus.

-
- You have awakened the swift essence ability [Avatar of Speed]. You have awakened 2 of 5 swift essence abilities.

Ability: [Avatar of Speed] (Swift)

- Special ability.
 - Cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

 - Effect (iron): Your movement abilities have increased effect and reduced stamina and mana cost.
-

“That seems a bit underwhelming,” Belinda said.

From the middle of the fading ritual circle, Sophie exploded into motion. She swiftly ran to the side of the room and up the wall, turning to run along the wall and around the room multiple times.

“Well, that’s quite a thing,” Clive said as the others watched her go around, swerving side to side on the wall in little jukes that didn’t seem to slow her down.

“Is she normally that zippy?” Jason asked Belinda.

“Not sure,” Belinda said. “When she goes running, the first thing she does is run away, so I never get to see much.”

Sophie leaped off the wall, flipping in the air and landing in a crouch.

“That may be the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen,” Jason said.

“You know you said that out loud, right?” Clive asked.

“I’ll stand by it.”

Belinda looked at Jason from under a sceptically furrowed brow.

“You think a woman back flipping off a wall is sexy?” she asked him.

“Yep.”

“You’re weird.”

“I’ll stand by that, too.”

Sophie stood up and walked over to them.

“Good ability,” she said.

“Avatar abilities are often good,” Clive said. “They embody an aspect of an essence, making you very good at a specific thing. In this case, movement abilities.”

“I like being fast,” Sophie said. “The ability I’ve always had makes me fast, and this makes me faster.”

“Can you show us that ability?” Jason asked.

“How do I do that?”

“It’s pretty instinctive. You just want to, basically.”

After a brief moment, the ability appeared in front of them.

Ability: [Free Runner] (Swift)

- Special ability.
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Increased speed. Low stamina and mana per second cost to run on walls and water. Momentum must be maintained on walls or water to prevent falling.

- Effect (bronze): Enhanced balance and spatial sense.

“Enhanced balance and spatial sense,” Jason read. “That would let you move very fast through a complicated environment. Super parkour.”

“Parkour?”

“In my world it’s what we call the practice of moving through complex spaces with efficiency and speed. People train to be very good. I’m guessing that ability of yours makes you very, very good at it.”

“Yes,” Sophie said plainly. He could see she wasn’t boasting but simply stating a fact. She neither wanted nor needed his validation. He chuckled.

“That’s a classic, skill-oriented power,” Clive said. “It seems simple and underpowered but lets you do something you’re good at very well.”

“Let’s see about the next one,” Sophie said. “Set it up.”

Clive did just that, performing the ritual of awakening with the stone of purgation.

-
- You have awakened the wind essence ability [Cleansing Breeze]. You have awakened 2 of 5 wind essence abilities.

Ability: [Cleansing Breeze] (Swift)

- Aura (holy, cleanse).
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Allies within the aura have increased resistance to curses, diseases, magic afflictions, poisons and unholy afflictions. This is a holy effect. Negates poisons in the air; this is a cleanse effect.

“Aura,” Clive said. “That is a big win.”

“It is,” Jason agreed.

“Why is that?” Belinda asked.

“Aura manipulation is an important skill for adventurers,” Clive said. “You can only learn it once you have an aura power, although any aura power will do.”

“He’s right,” Jason said. “Aura control is one the things that differentiates a capable adventurer from a scrub.”

“A scrub?” Sophie asked.

“You might know it as a buster,” Jason said. “Doesn’t matter; you can get it from context.”

“It’s an unexpected ability for the wind essence,” Clive said. “I would have expected something from the mystic essence. It’s also the exact opposite of Jason’s aura.”

“Will they conflict?” Belinda asked.

“No,” Clive said. “Jason’s aura only affects enemies, while Miss Wexler’s only affects allies. So long as they’re on the same side, it won’t be a problem.”

Clive and Belinda looked between Jason and Sophie, who were giving each other assessing looks.

“I wouldn’t rule out problems just yet,” Belinda said.

“It’s a holy ability, too,” Clive said. “That’s matches well with the celestine holy affinity.”

“I thought they had astral affinity,” Jason said.

“They have holy too,” Clive said. “Still not as many as elves, who have life, nature and magic affinities, which is why elves make such good healers. I’ll set up the next ritual.”

Jason stood next to Clive as he used his essence ability to draw golden lines on the floor.

“How likely is it really that she picks up a flight power?” he asked quietly. “I’ve heard a lot of people say that you can’t go making predictions, yourself included.”

“Looking at all twenty abilities, that’s correct. It’s why the best approach is to select a more general direction for your power set. Pick out your essences and leave the specifics to fate. There’s always one or two abilities you can confidently see coming, though. For example, there are certain awakening stones that have a higher change of producing auras if you have a lot of abilities and no aura yet. Another example is all those feast stones you used, Jason.”

“I didn’t tell you about that.”

“Farrah did. The combination of feast stones and the blood essence meant that a health-draining power was almost a certainty. It could have been any of a wide slew of health-draining powers but you were almost certain to get one of them. If you combine a celestine’s natural aptitude for utility powers, the wind essence and a sky stone, that’s as

close to a guarantee of a flight power as you'll get. You couldn't ask for a better chance, except for maybe with the wing essence."

Jason moved away from the circle, pausing next to Sophie.

"Good luck," he said, then joined Belinda out of the way against the wall.

Clive performed the ritual no differently than any of the others.

-
- You have awakened the wind essence ability [Leaf on the Wind]. You have awakened 3 of 5 wind essence abilities.

Ability: [Leaf on the Wind] (Swift)

- Special ability (movement, dimension).
- Cost: Moderate mana-per-second.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Glide through the air; highly effective at riding the wind. Can reduce weight to slow fall at a reduced mana cost. Ignore or ride the effects of strong wind, even when this ability is not in active use.

Clive let out a boyish laugh.

"You've got it," he said. "I'll have to look it up to make sure but I'd bet my library that's a flight power."

Jason took out a tablet and looked up the ability.

"Yep," he said. "It was the third one down on the list of wind essence flight abilities. From what I'm seeing here, you glide at iron and sort of fly-glide at bronze. Riding the wind, that sort of thing. You'll have full-flown flight at silver, then go back to wind-riding at gold, but you'll be controlling the wind. Doesn't say about diamond, which is no surprise."

Sophie and Belinda looked at each other, grins spreading on their faces.

"You can fly," Belinda said.

Sophie nodded. "I can feel it."

"The next move is obvious, then," Jason said. "Let's go jump off a sky palace."

"You might want to be a little cautious," Clive said. "Until she gets a handle on the ability."

"Boo!" Belinda jeered.

"Did you just boo me?" Clive asked.

"And so she should," Jason said. "Boo!"

"You're acting like children."

"We're about to go jump off the roof," Jason said. "Of course we're acting like children."

Chapter 123:

Star Seed

In the Adventure Society marshalling yard, a portal opened and people started stepping through. There were fourteen in total, each bearing a pin marking them as Adventure Society officials. The woman at the front looked to be of early middle age, with her hair unflatteringly pinned tightly back. Her Adventure Society pin was black.

Jason, Clive, Belinda and Sophie waited until the last memorial for the day had finished before moving outside to test Sophie's new abilities. The gliding had a few false starts, but the slow fall function of the power was intuitive enough that she went unharmed. Several attempts in, she was gliding out over the ocean before curving back in to land on the lower levels of the palace. She would have preferred if the earlier attempts hadn't involved dragging her waterlogged self onto one of the palace's sea-level platforms.

Aside from her gliding ability, being outdoors allowed her to test her wind blade. She could throw out a shimmering arc of slicing wind with a sweep of an arm or leg. A short gesture would produce a small, swift blade that was hard to see. A larger motion created a longer and more visible blade that was noticeably slower.

"Some abilities will come easily and naturally," Clive said. "Others you'll need to practice before you can use them effectively."

"We'll leave you to it, for today," Jason said. "Play around and get used to them. Tomorrow we start training."

"That Adventure Society assessment is in a week, right?" Belinda asked. "Is she going to be ready?"

"The next intake was cancelled," Jason said. "After days of memorials, no one is looking to feed their young people into the grinder. The assessments will be rigorous in a way they haven't been for a long time, with a few exceptions."

"Won't that make it harder for Sophie to pass?" Belinda asked.

"The field assessment judges two things," Jason said. "The skill to reliably hunt monsters and the judgement to know when not to. I won't let her participate until she's ready."

He looked at Sophie, standing unhappily in her still-wet clothes.

"No one is going to argue that you lack skill," he told her. "Have you ever fought a monster?"

She shook her head.

“Once Rufus deems you ready, I’ll take you out to the delta and we’ll do some adventure board notices. If you meet his standards, then passing the field assessment won’t be a problem.”

A meeting was taking place in the conference room next to the director’s office in the Adventure Society administration building. At the head of the table but standing instead of sitting was the leader of the inquiry team, Tabitha Gert. Her clothes were plain, with the only flourish being her black Adventure Society pin. She wore a stern expression, accentuated by her tightly pulled-back hair. Elspeth Arella was also present, sitting to Gert’s right. Emir Bahadir sat at the other end of the table, his relaxed slouch a contrast with Arella’s poise and Gert’s rigidity.

“Is there a reason the director of the Magic Society is not here?” Tabitha asked.

“Lucian Lamprey would obstruct and inform because it serves his purposes, regardless of the outside consequences,” Arella said. This earned a pointed cough in her direction from Emir, which she responded to with a flat look.

“Having Lamprey here,” Arella said, turning back to Gert, “would be as good as sending the families in question an explanatory pamphlet detailing out intentions.”

“That’s very unhelpful,” Gert said.

“Of that, I am very much aware,” Arella said.

Gert turned her attention to Emir.

“You are convinced these five expedition members have been compromised?” she asked. “If I discovered that this was some manner of ploy to distract from the enquiry, it would not go well for you, gold-ranker or not.”

“I’m convinced that the political cost of forcing the issue and being wrong is preferable to leaving it alone and being wrong.”

Arella gestured at the door, which swung open of its own accord to admit Danielle Geller. Arella used her power again to close the door behind her. While Danielle would prefer to throw her out a window, she restricted herself to throwing Arella a dissatisfied glance before schooling her expression into blank professionalism.

“Sorry I’m late,” Danielle said. “I’ve just come from a water link communication with Jonah’s family.”

“This is the one of the five from your family?” Gert asked.

“He’s from a branch family of House Geller, but broadly, yes. I’ve just been speaking with his parents and the branch family patriarch.”

“This boy, Jonah,” Emir said. “He refuses to be examined?”

“Yes, just like the others,” Danielle said. “He’s been isolating himself from us. His behaviour screams that he sees us as some kind of threat.”

“I’ve just had word,” Arella said. “All five have withdrawn from their existing teams and formed a team together.”

“What?” Danielle asked. “When did this happen?”

“Around an hour ago. I’ve had my deputy director keep a discreet but watchful eye on any official activity related to the five.”

“We need to act,” Gert said. “However, it is outside the Adventure Society’s purview to forcibly subject the five to examination.”

“Jonah may not have consented,” Danielle said, “but I’ve explained the situation to his people. They have given me formal permission to act on their behalf regarding his welfare. They are making the legal arrangements as we speak and they’ll send everything through the Magic Society via document duplication.”

“There is a risk that word will get out that way,” Arella said. “Lamprey pays little attention to his own Magic Society but these are hardly ordinary times. Even if he maintains his inattention, his deputy is subtle and thorough.”

“A dangerous combination,” Emir said. “His loyalty?”

“To Lamprey. By all indications they are actual friends. My instincts tell me his only true allegiance is only to himself but I’ve never found so much as a hint of disloyalty, and I did quite a bit of looking.”

Gert frowned at Arella.

“Using the Magic Society for such communication is a necessary risk,” Gert said. “This city has seen quite enough activity operating outside of the rules.”

“We shouldn’t let rules get in the way of something potentially this important,” Emir said.

“There are always reasons to ignore the rules,” Gert said, “which is why we must be fastidious in following them. They are the very basis for civilisation, without which we would exist in a state of anarchy.”

“I disagree,” Emir said.

“I don’t care,” Gert said. “This operation is being conducted under the strictures of the Adventure Society, not one of your frivolous private excursions. Gold rank or not, you will follow instructions.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Once the legal documentation arrives,” Gert said, “We must act immediately to secure this Jonah boy. Have you lined up someone capable to examine him? The local Magic Society does not sound like a satisfactory place to find the assistance we need.”

“I’ve contacted the local high priest of Purity,” Emir said. “He’s politically detached and has as good a chance as anyone of finding anything that has been done to them and purging it safely.”

“You think there may be a danger?” Arella asked.

“The people we captured in the astral space all quite thoroughly killed themselves with some manner of object buried in their bodies,” Emir said. “My concern is our five adventurers coming to a similar end.”

“Turning to the church of Purity is a good choice,” Danielle said. “I want to send Jonah home to his family intact.”

The arrival of the inquiry team from the Adventure Society’s Continental Council had little impact on Jason, at least over the first few days. He had not been a member of the expedition and was too low rank to be involved in major Society affairs. In the mean time, he had been working with Rufus to prepare Sophie for the next Adventure Society intake.

“Her skills are impressive,” Rufus said. He gave Sophie his own assessment but remained mostly hands-off, leaving Jason to introduce her to various aspects of adventuring. He took on more of a mentor role to Jason, offering advice and guidance on what to teach her, and how.

“Her skills are impressive,” Rufus said. “In terms of empty-hand technique, she’s better than I am. Her weapon-work isn’t as strong but given her abilities that won’t be an issue.”

“All the fighting she’s done has been against people, though,” Jason said.

Rufus nodded.

“Her lack of experience fighting monsters is unquestionably her main shortfall,” he said. “Take her out into the delta and do some adventure board notices. Recruit Humphrey, if you can. He has more immediate impact than you if someone needs to step in.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Jason said. “Have you heard anything from his mother about the inquiry?”

“They’re auditing the whole branch,” Rufus said. “From what she’s hearing, there will be sweeping demotions across the board, expedition members or otherwise. More than a few will be losing their membership entirely.”

“I’ll probably get bumped back down to two stars,” Jason said. “I always suspected that moving up to three stars so quickly was part of Arella’s games, and I daresay this inquiry will agree.”

“I wouldn’t worry about local politics too much,” Rufus said. “Bronze rank will be a fresh start that you can make far from here. My part in the Remore Academy annex with the Gellers should time nicely with you ranking up and your indenture contract coming to an end. We can head for Vitesse, leaving this city and its troubles behind.”

“We have no ideas how things will look, six months from now,” Jason said. “There should be a monster surge by then, right?”

“There should be a monster surge by now,” Rufus said. “I’ll be interested in where your thieves will be in six months. Things are changing in very large ways for them.”

“That’s up to them,” Jason said. “The whole point was to give them the chance to choose their own path.”

“How goes the non-combat training?”

“I’ve been teaching them what Farrah taught me about meditation, aura manipulation. The mental exercises. Are you sure I’m ready to teach anyone?”

“Farrah was always impressed by you,” Rufus said. “We all saw the potential in you. You’re her legacy now.”

Jason face was stricken.

“Don’t say that,” he said. “I can’t live up to it.”

“None of us live up to the expectations we put on ourselves,” Rufus said. “Gary and Farrah taught me to accept that. But in the attempt, we push ourselves to new heights. You don’t have to be some shining representative of who she was. Just try and be an adventurer she would be proud to have trained.”

“That, I can do. It feels strange, passing on what she taught me to these women.”

“You’ve been teaching them both?”

“Wexler will get essences for her friend sooner or later. If she knows the meditation techniques and training exercises beforehand, that’s only for the good. Wexler tends to listen more with her friend riding herd on her, too.”

“Problems with the training?”

“Wexler’s walls are slowly coming down,” Jason said. “A lot of construction went into them, though. Building trust is half the battle.”

“Trust is crucial,” Rufus said. “If you want to teach her anything effectively, she needs to trust that what you’re imparting has value and that you’re doing so in good faith.”

“Any tips?”

“Don’t try to rush things. Let time do its work.”

Jason nodded.

“It won’t hurt to take a day off, then,” he said. “I haven’t seen Cassandra since the day the expedition got back.”

“You have plans?”

“She invited me to go sailing.”

“They’re gone,” Genevieve said. The deputy director of the Adventure Society was in the director’s office, along with Danielle, Emir and Tabitha Gert.

“What about tracking their badges?” Gert asked.

“The fact that we couldn’t track their badges is what drew our attention to them in the first place,” Danielle said.

“They were all directed to have their aura’s re-examined and their badges replaced,” Arella said. “None of them showed up to do so.”

“Do we know anything?” Emir asked.

“I’ve already got my information network in Old City looking,” Arella said. “They don’t have the skills or the powers to hide from my people in Old City. If they’re there, we’ll find them. If they left, we’ll know which direction. Our best course of action now is patience.”

“How reliable is your network in Old City?” Gert asked.

“Now that everyone knows my father has me standing behind him, his power in Old City is unchallenged,” Arella said. “You couldn’t ask for better.”

“You said they don’t have the skills to hide,” Emir said. “That is assuming their skills are what they were. For all we know, they may not be in charge of their bodies anymore.”

“It doesn’t change our course of action,” Danielle said. “We have people looking, so we be patient and let them. Acting just for the sake of doing something is borrowing trouble when we already have enough.”

All the major temples in Greenstone fronted the Divine Square but the of their space occupied extensive chunks of the temple district in sprawling, multi-building complexes. The temple of Purity was no different, with a number of sizeable buildings spread out over its spacious grounds. A priestess of Purity, Anisa Lasalle, walked through those grounds to a construction site in the early stages of adding a new building the temple’s collection.

On site was a foreman’s office made of what looked like hastily thrown together materials. Anyone with the right knowledge and the ability to see magic would realise that time, effort and expense had been put into the powerful protections against eavesdropping

built into the structure. Should anyone enquire, it was a sound-suppressing measure, allowing the foreman to hold meeting with the church representatives in peace and quiet.

After stepping inside the building, Anisa glanced around, sensing for gaps in the sound-shielding magic but finding it thorough and intact. The other occupant of the room looked every bit the ordinary construction foreman, yet she looked at him with a distaste undue a simple tradesperson.

“Well?” The man asked.

“Your thrown-together plan has been lucky enough to work,” Anisa said. “All the attention is on the five you seeded. No one has even considered that your true agents exist to look for. We suggest you restrict your activities for the moment, so as to not risk exposure.”

“Agreed,” the man said. “The next stage is reliant on remaining unnoticed.”

“You are certain that Bahadir will send people into another astral space?”

“Bahadir’s people are loyal and discreet, but the people they work with are not always the same. Our information is solid.”

“And this other astral space is still of sufficient scale to do as promised?”

“Oh, yes,” the foreman said. “It’s not the prize the desert astral space would have been, but still a very welcome one. As for the secondary effects of our claiming it, they will be more than enough to meet your needs. Better, in fact, since you won’t need to evacuate your people as far.”

“We are evacuating no one,” Anisa said. “It would arouse too much suspicion.”

“I admire your conviction,” he said. “After the adventurers have returned from this new astral space, we will need to become more active to carry out the next step. The risk of some of our agents being exposed during this phase is high.”

“They cannot be allowed to talk,” Anisa said.

“Again, we are in agreement,” he said. “We have more star seeds and any of our people who know anything will be implanted.”

“See that they are,” Anisa said. “We’ll speak again after the first stage is complete.”

“I look forward to it, priestess.”

“I don’t.”

She swept over to the door, flung it open and left, as if rushing to escape a trapped stench.

Chapter 124: It's About How You Use It

While a cabal of the city's most powerful plotted to get their hands on Thadwick Mercer and the other five, Thadwick's sister was on her family's boat with Jason. Jason and Cassandra were – if the half-dozen Mercer family staff were discounted – all alone on the open water. The vessel was the size of some billionaire's yacht, to the point that Jason suspected the sails it boasted to be vestigial. It was made of wood but was a far cry from the wooden ships Jason knew. White paint and smooth lacquer, seemingly impervious to the seawater and salty air, gave it a feel more akin to a contemporary pleasure craft.

There was a sunken lounging area in the middle of the foredeck. It was a square space, lined with seating on all sides and sporting a glass table in the middle. A huge parasol was affixed to the centre of the table to offer shade.

"This was a very good idea," Jason said. "I'm so glad you offered. Everything has been sadness, frustration and grief lately."

"My thoughts exactly," Cassandra said. "First the lost people to the expedition, now these outsiders with their inquiry are pushing to hand Thadwick over to them."

"For what?" Jason asked.

"They think something was done to him and want him examined by their own people when ours have already looked him over quite thoroughly. Mother is considering having Thadwick leave until everything has blown over. You haven't heard anything about it from the gold-ranker, have you?"

"Emir's involved in it? I haven't seen him for days. If nothing else, I've been caught up trying to get my new indenture to listen to me."

"Things not going well with your first indenture?" Cassandra asked.

"I'm here to forget about that," Jason said, "not talk about it."

"I thought you were here for me?" she said provocatively.

"Nope," Jason said with weary shamelessness. "You are a very welcome addendum to what is primarily an escape plan. I just hope you don't take on the usual role of beautiful women in escape plans and betray me at a critical moment."

"What kind of critical moment would I betray you in?" Cassandra asked.

"Well," Jason said, "the kind that has a hammock, for preference. I'm sure saw I spied a hammock hanging up somewhere when I came aboard."

"Was it big enough for two?" Cassandra asked.

"You know, now that you bring it up, I actually think it was."

She let out a relaxed chuckle.

“Even if it wasn’t,” she said, “it will be by the time we wander over there.”

The staff were discretely out of sight, but Jason could sense their auras.

“That must have been a very strange way to grow up,” he said. “Never having a truly private moment.”

“It teaches you to put on a façade,” she said. “One that takes an unusual person to shake.”

“Shaking it isn’t the trick,” Jason said. “You need to make the person want to come out from behind it. You have to be tantalising.”

“That’s what you are, is it?”

“I think I have my moments,” he said. “You’ll have to tell me.”

“Where is it exactly that you learned your particular way of handling people?” she asked.

“Private school.”

“Private school?”

“Yes. I grew up on a rather pleasant little stretch of coastline. Just a little town, tourists in the summer.”

“Tourists?”

“Taking a holiday where I come from is a lot cheaper and easier than it is here. It isn’t just the wealthy who can do it, although they certainly do it best. The less affluent participating in such activities are called tourists.”

“Do they have something to do with your private school?”

“Definitely not. Around thirty years or so back, a lot of wealthy people looked at our lovely stretch of coast and the conveniently placed local highway and decided to move in. Being rich folk, of course, they had no interest in our humble little town. Small, exclusive communities started popping up around us like mushrooms after the rain. Swanky summer homes and the kind of accommodation you can only afford if you own a boat like this one.”

“It doesn’t really rain here,” she said. “I’ll have to take your word on the mushrooms.”

“I’m trustworthy,” Jason said. “I just don’t seem like it because seeming trustworthy is suspicious.”

“You can be an unnecessarily convoluted man.”

“Thank you. Anyway, a lot of these rich people would only hang about for the summer, but enough stayed that they needed a place for their children to go to school. Thus, the Casselton Educational Institute was formed. Excellent teachers, quality

education. Exorbitant cost. Everyone of means in the region sent their children there, from the first day of school until they were sent off to university.”

“Education is more prominent in your homeland, isn’t it?” Cassandra asked.

“For now. The government keeps taking away money from the public schools to give to the wealthy private ones, but they haven’t finished the job quite yet.”

Cassandra didn’t need to ask why; power dynamics were universal across worlds.

“Now, we weren’t amongst the richest of the rich,” Jason continued, “but my family did very well for themselves. My mother got in property sales early, making quite the bundle on the influx of wealthy buyers. My father is a landscape architect and had a strong hand in literally shaping the new communities. Between them, they sold and/or designed most of the region.”

“So your family had money enough to send you to this fancy school.”

“I don’t look like most of the children who went to that school. My father’s parents came from another land and we only have humans where I come from. Instead of looking down on elves or leonids or whoever, people isolate and exclude by ethnicity.”

“That sounds foolish.”

“It is. It’s getting better, but there are always these undercurrents of prejudice, coming out in little ways most people don’t even notice. It’s like constantly being pricked with needles and being accused of making a fuss if you have the gall to point it out.”

“That doesn’t sound delightful,” she said.

“You get used to it. That’s just the background issue, though. The more specific problem was my older brother.”

“He made it hard for you?”

“Not intentionally, which made it all the more difficult to deal with. You see, my brother is excellent with people. He’s the handsome one, the charming one. The obedient one. He can just go with the flow, let things pass without questioning. He has a way of intuiting what people want and becoming that. A social chameleon. Do you have chameleons here?”

“We do,” Cassandra said.

“Well, he is one, socially speaking. He doesn’t manipulate people, not consciously. He just likes people and people like him. He went down very well with the wealthy families, who liked how unprejudiced they looked if their children had a multiethnic friend. It saved them from getting one themselves.”

“Let me guess,” Cassandra said. “One outsider friend was just the right amount, with a second one being surplus to requirements.”

"Exactly," Jason said. "It sounds like rich families are the same wherever you go."

"The way you describe your brother reminds me of Beth Cavendish," Cassandra said.

"You've met her, yes?"

"I have," Jason said.

"There aren't a lot of non-human families at the peak of Greenstone society, which doesn't always look good when you're dealing with global training partners. Beth is something of an ideal, which makes people want to rope her in. She's very socially adroit, in a more subtle fashion than you. Similar to your brother, I suspect."

"Are you saying I don't smoothly fit in?"

"Your approach to socialising is like tossing snakes into a ballroom."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," he said innocently.

"My mother said that the first time you met her, you denied being in a group with some of the city's most powerful people and claimed to have won a raffle."

"I forgot about that, he said with a chuckle. "You're right about being socially adroit, though. I never had Kaito's – that's my brother's name, Kaito. I never had his skill for getting along. I just can't seem to help challenging and provoking."

"Yes, we've all noticed."

"Shush, you," he said, putting a finger to her lips. She kissed it and pushed it away.

"I was one foreign boy too many," he continued, "despite not being foreign at all. Kaito is a year older than me, so as far as the other kids were concerned, I was a disappointing rehash of the well-received original. I only had one real friend. The literal girl next door. Her name is Amy and we grew up together."

"Who you fell in love with, obviously," Cassandra said.

"Oh, it wasn't just love," Jason said. "It was eighties power-ballad love."

"I have no idea what that means," she said.

"Imagine a man with long hair, no shirt, open vest and leather pants, walking into the ocean while singing a song."

"That sounds like an insane person."

"Yes," Jason agreed. "It was that kind of love."

"It came to a tragic end?"

"She married my brother."

"That must have hurt."

"I reacted poorly, I'll admit," Jason said, "but that's a story for another day. When we were in school, my brother cast a long shadow and I never had his knack for becoming what people wanted. It turned out that my knack was for getting people to do what I

wanted. At least for a little while, until they realised what I did and got cross. They had no interest in being my friends, though, and I quickly stopped caring what a bunch of entitled rich kids thought about me.”

“It’s been my experience,” Cassandra said, “that things can become quite political when you gather enough wealthy children together.”

“That’s been my experience as well,” Jason said. “There and here. Speaking of entitled rich kids, how is your brother doing? You said people were looking to study him.”

Cassandra nodded, unhappily.

“Things had been going so well with him after the expedition. He’s been training non-stop, actually building the skills he should have developed long ago. Mother and father are thrilled. Or they would be if it weren’t for the rumours going around, which is why people want to take him away and start probing him.”

“What kind of rumours?” Jason asked. “I’ve been too busy to keep an ear out, lately.”

“Your friend Bahadir brought tracking stones for all the members of the expedition, first to rescue survivors, then recover the fallen. There were five people, my brother included, whose tracking stones lost track of them. They were still found, all severely hurt. Now people are saying that something was done to them in the time they couldn’t be tracked and they were left to be found.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s frustrating,” she said. “Thadwick is finally turning into the person we always hoped he would become and people found an all-new way to harass him. They say the changes to his personality are some kind of magical parasite.”

“I know from experience that being thrust into wild and unexpected danger can see you come out the other side different. I’m not the man I was before coming here. I’ve seen dangers and been driven to become as prepared as I can be for the next time. It makes sense to me that Thadwick experience something similar.”

“Thank you,” she said, leaning into him. “I know you and he never got along and I thought that might taint your judgement.”

“Hopefully, I’m growing as a person. Have the other four been experiencing similar problems?”

“They have,” she said. “To the point that they felt the need to all leave their old teams and form a new one together.”

“That will only deepen the rumours.”

“I know, but Thadwick seems more settled this way. Go back to talking about your school; I want to hear more.”

“Well, there’s not much to tell, really. I learned two lessons about people that have always held true, in my world or yours. One was that people really like to fill in the gaps in a story. You give someone the right selection of facts and you don’t have to lie to them. They’ll connect the pieces in accordance with their own beliefs and lie to themselves for you.”

“Wouldn’t that make people wary of you, once they figure out what you’re doing?”

“That’s where the second lesson comes in,” Jason said. “When someone believes something, they believe it hard. Too hard. They’ll dismiss good evidence that contradicts their belief and accept spurious evidence that supports it. So, in their mind, if you’re wrong, they’re very wrong, and the whole point is that their thoughts don’t go down that path.”

“That sounds like something that could get out of hand,” Cassandra said.

“Oh, yes,” Jason said. “These realisations were far from original revelations. People have been using them in my world for thousands of years, to rather disastrous effect.”

“So, why use them?”

“Amy used to ask me the same thing. People liked her better than me.”

“What did you tell her?”

“It’s what I have,” he said. “Like any tool, it’s about how you use it. A hammer can build a house or club someone to death.”

“Did it make you any more friends?”

“I would more say it gave me an accepted position in the social landscape. I’ve learned to take a quality over quantity approach to personal relationships,” he said. “Look at you, for example. Every eligible young man in the city hates my guts because of you, and so they should. You are spectacular by any metric.”

“Thank you. But what about this Amy girl? It doesn’t sound like she was too spectacular.”

“She was,” Jason said. “Still is, presumably. I’ve known her for most of my life and there’s no one I understand better. She was absolutely worth falling in love with, which only became a problem when my brother finally noticed that fact.”

“If you knew her so well, why didn’t you see it coming?”

“I told you: people will dismiss good evidence if the bad evidence tells them what they want to hear. I’m no more immune to that than anyone.”

“You seem to have taken it well.”

“I can talk about it, now,” he said. “At the time, I blew up my whole life, forming an ever-deepening vortex of mediocrity. Banal job, no real friends. A series of relationships you could see the end of before they began.”

He flashed her a wry smile.

“Coming to an alternate world was the best thing that ever happened to me,” he said. “Of course, nine of the ten worst things that ever happened to me happened here. Still, completely worth. I’m happy with the balance.”

“Well,” Cassandra said. “Maybe we can go find that hammock and tilt the scale.”

Chapter 125:

We End Here

As a week of ongoing memorial services came to a close, the adventuring community fell into a sober silence. The Adventure Society campus was quiet and, for the first time Jason had seen, largely occupied by adventurers who didn't come from the upper echelons of Greenstone society.

Jason had learned to recognise the upper crust adventurers over time. Many he knew by sight, although the quality of their gear was an even better indicator. The people he saw roaming the campus tended towards plain, functional equipment; more value-for-money than the highest performing gear.

There was a pregnant pause in the wake of the disastrous expedition, while people awaited word of what the inquiry would choose to do. In the absence of the usual dominating forces, frequently overlooked adventurers were coming to the fore. These were the adventurers who would never have gotten a place on the expedition and, in the absence of those who did, stepped in to fill the gap. While the expedition was now back, the city's most powerful families were licking their wounds and awaiting the inquiry results. The adventurers newly flourishing in their place were left free to continue.

Belinda started working with Clive at the Magic Society. He took her in and showed her what he was expecting from her while things were still quiet for him. Once he was finally allowed access to what the expedition had brought back, he expected to become very busy. At that point, he would need her to have already grasped the basics of her new job.

For his own preparations, he reviewed works on astral magic from the Magic Society's library, as well as his own collection. Although it suited his purposes, he was rather dismayed at their availability. The people already working on the materials brought back really should have been accessing the astral magic texts quite heavily.

The incompetence of his fellows allowed Clive to put together a quick-reference library of astral magic to help his own investigation, once he had access to the materials. He also put together some theory primers for Belinda, to fill in the gaps in her patchwork education. Whenever Clive had no specific tasks for her, she could dive into the list.

Jason, in the meantime, introduced Sophie to the training cycle that Rufus, Gary and Farrah had introduced to him. Some of it, like the meditation training and the weightlifting, was new. Other things, like the parkour and the observation training, she had been doing some version of for years.

Because she could outperform him in certain aspects of the training, it was colouring her view of his ability in the others. She was self-sufficient by nature, more used to finding her own way through things than having someone instruct her. She hadn't had anything like a teacher since her father had died and was resisting it now.

In one of the cloud palace's meditation rooms, Jason was instructing her on using meditation techniques to gain better control of the mana within her body. They were sitting on the soft cloud floor, cross-legged and face to face.

"I can actively move the mana around my body," Sophie was arguing. "Taking control feels better. Stronger."

"This technique isn't about strength or control," Jason said. "It's about mapping out how the mana flows within the body. You need to be patient, sense how the mana moves on its own. Exercising control before gaining an understanding will do more harm than good."

"It doesn't feel right," she said. "It really feels like I should be doing it my way."

Jason ran his hands over his face, taking a deep, calming breath. He got to his feet.

"That's enough for today, I think," he said.

"That's it?" she asked.

"I don't think continuing will be very productive."

She lightly hopped up to her feet.

"So, if I don't do everything the way you want, you just give up?"

"Meditation is about achieving a useful state of mind," Jason said. "If we have fundamentally opposed positions on what you need to achieve then we get nowhere. Letting it go and starting fresh tomorrow will achieve more than forcing the issue."

Their respective suites were close together in the guest wing, so they walked together as they returned, albeit in silence. They encountered Clive and Belinda on the way, who easily spotted the tension. Jason gave them a curt nod of greeting before disappearing into his suite.

Clive frowned as he looked at the door through which Jason had passed through, then at the dissatisfied expression on Sophie's face.

"I think it's time we had a little talk," he said. "Do you have a moment to discuss something?"

She gave him a wary, assessing look before nodding and heading into the suite she shared with Belinda.

"She means 'of course, please do come in,'" Belinda said.

“That’s the impression I was getting,” he said, Belinda laughing as they followed Sophie inside to the main lounge in the centre of their suite. Sophie took a chilled bottle of water from a cooler cabinet and fell into a couch while Clive walked over and sat down in a chair opposite, across a low refreshments table from her.

“So what is it?” Sophie asked as Belinda sat down beside her. Clive looked Sophie straight in the eye.

“We told you that we were given a choice of awakening stones and Jason chose the one that gave you your aura.”

“I remember.”

“Jason is an affliction specialist and that stone was almost certain to give you some ability that would be bad for him if you ended up on the opposite sides of a fight again. Which is exactly what it did.”

“So?” Belinda asked.

“He wants me to ask why,” Sophie said.

“Yes,” Clive acknowledged. “I asked him why he would choose that stone myself.”

“And?” Sophie asked.

“He said that three men had gone to considerable lengths to control your destiny. Cole Silva lost his chance when Lucian Lamprey became involved. Lamprey lost his chance when Jason claimed your indenture. I didn’t know who the third man was, though.”

“Asano is the third man,” Sophie said.

“Yes,” Clive said. “He told me the same thing. And that’s why he chose that stone. It makes it a little harder for him to enforce his grip on you.”

“I never asked him to be my protector,” Sophie said.

“He doesn’t want to be,” Clive said. “He’s giving you the tools to you need to protect yourself.”

“He thinks he’s my hero?”

“He is your hero,” Clive said. “Throwing you through a portal and never thinking about you again would have fulfilled whatever responsibility he felt toward you, and not many of us would have done that much for you. But he doesn't think like me and he's decided this is the right thing to do.”

He shook his head disbelievingly before continuing.

“Do you even understand what he's paid, literally and figuratively, to put you in the position you are now? He stood up to the directors of both the Adventure Society and the Magic Society. He actually stood in front of each and told them that he was taking you out of their hands. I wouldn't have done that. The idea of doing that would never have entered

my head. I don't think you're worth what he's done for you, but when Jason decides to do something, he goes all the way. He decided to help you, which is why you're here instead of chained to a bed somewhere with a glazed look in your eye."

"I didn't ask for any of that," Sophie said.

"And you don't deserve it," Clive said. "Not everything he's done for you. It's past time you started to show him some gratitude."

"You make him out like he's this great guy," Sophie said, "but I've seen plenty of lying, scheming manipulators. He fits right in."

"Yes, he does," Clive said. "And look what his schemes and manipulations have done."

Clive stood up.

"I've said my piece; take it or ignore it as you please. I'll see you tomorrow, Belinda."

He walked out of the suite, leaving Sophie and Belinda alone.

Belinda looked at Sophie, caught up in thought. Sophie turned and met her gaze.

"What do you think?" Sophie asked.

Belinda thought for a while before answering.

"Maybe Asano needs to feel powerful. To prove to himself he can make something a little less awful when awful is in abundant supply. We both know what it's like to be stuck in the mud, powerless to do anything about it."

"People don't help other people to feel in control," Sophie said. "They push those people down."

"Jory doesn't," Belinda said. "Look at what he's done to help people. I think maybe Asano is like that. And if he is, then what he's done for us is really incredible."

"So I should go fawning after Asano, now?"

"No," Belinda said. "But maybe not treat everything he says and does like it's part of some scheme to screw you over. He's had every chance to hurt us but everything he's done has helped us. At least give him the chance to prove he's actually trying to do right by you. Maybe even let him do it."

"If he's such a good guy, then why does he always act shady?"

"Maybe he realised you'd find a good-guy even more suspicious and didn't want you running for the hills."

Sophie's brow furrowed as she thought it over.

"Yeah," she acknowledged with a nod. "I guess I would have."

She got to her feet.

"I'll go talk to him," she said. "Maybe I can clear the air a little. Hear him out with an open mind, at least."

Belinda gave her an encouraging smile.

"That sounds sensible," she said. "I think we've been scrambling for so long that we may have lost the knack for sensible and patient."

Sophie went out into the hall, seeing Rufus just leaving Jason's suite.

"Is he in?" she asked.

"He is, but I'd leave him be, just for now. I just let him know that he's been demoted to one star."

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"It means that he just went from the highest rank he could have to the lowest."

"Why?"

"The inquiry in the Adventure Society."

"I thought they were just looking at that expedition," Sophie said.

"They're doing a full audit of the local branch, looking at everything and everyone. They just announced a sweeping wave of demotions, including Jason's."

"He doesn't seem like the kind that would bother."

"Yeah," Rufus said. "Not seeming bothered is something he's good at."

Jason looked out from his terrace, the late afternoon sun shining over the ocean. He had been expecting to lose one star, but two was a blow. Rufus had once again told him that it didn't matter, that soon enough he would be bronze and could start over at a new rank. It still felt like a repudiation of everything he felt he'd achieved. He knew he'd done some contentious things but he believed he was a good adventurer. Until the moment Rufus walked in, he had the stars to prove it.

Jason vaulted over the edge of the terrace, his cloak appearing around him. After floating down to a lower level of the palace he made his way to the shore and set off through the Adventure Society campus.

When he reached the marshalling yard he found a throng of people. Rows of bulletin boards had been set up, listing out demotions. A large notice at the front instructed the demoted to go to the administration building to have the stars removed from their badges. Jason went through the rows, shoulder to shoulder with people as he looked for his name. He didn't think Rufus had gotten it wrong, but he needed to see for himself. He noticed as he browsed through the names that many weren't just demoted but had their membership revoked entirely.

He found his name. Jason Asano. Old rank: three stars. New rank: one star. He let out a weary breath, then extricated himself from the crowd. He looked in the direction of the Adventure Society and saw that not many people heading there to confirm their demotion. He overheard talk that people wouldn't stand for it and the decision would be overturned. He heard more than one assertion that they would refuse to confirm the demotion until all the politics had played out.

Jason made his way to the administration building where a long bench had been set up. There were four Adventure Society officials behind it, with people queuing up in front. The officials were each using a wedge-shaped magical stone to remove stars from badges. None of the queues were long and Jason joined the one that led to Vincent.

"Rufus found you, then," Vincent said when Jason reached the front.

"He did."

"Sorry about this."

Jason handed over his badge, watching the third star, then the second disappear as Vincent touched it twice with his stone. Jason took it back and left. Standing outside the admin building, he had no interest in going back to the cloud palace. Setting his feet in the direction of the jobs hall, he strode off. He wanted to kill something.

After four days in the delta, he met a member of the Geller family and discovering that people thought he had gone missing.

"No," Jason had told the man. "I'm just doing adventure notices. Tell them I'm fine."

It was another week before he returned to the city. He went straight to the jobs hall, handing over the contract he had originally taken, along with a stack of completed adventure board notices. As he made his way across the Adventure Society campus, he heard Cassandra call out his name. She was rushing to catch up to him but became hesitant as she drew closer.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I've been trying to find you," she said. "I heard you were out in the delta."

"I was."

"Jason, I..."

She looked around. They were standing in an open area of grass, with very few people in sight. Ever since the expedition, far fewer people were to be found at the campus, with the demotions only making it worse.

"What is it?" he asked, as if the distance she kept between them didn't tell him what she was about to say.

"I have to end things. Between you and I."

He was going to ask why, but his brain beat his mouth.

"The demotion," he said.

"I've received a lot of privileges, being part of my family," she said. Her beautiful face was sunken, reluctant, but determined. "There are responsibilities that come with it, too. I have to find a match that makes the family stronger."

"I see."

"Your lack of background always made it hard to convince the family. Mother helped. Your connections to the Gellers and the Vitesse adventurers were good and your rapid rise silenced a lot of voices. Dropping to one star, though. I have to find someone reliable."

"You think I'm unreliable?" he asked.

"You know I don't. I argued against it, but it was decided. We end here."

"Just like that."

"I didn't want this," she said. "They're being short-sighted, I know."

"But they're family," Jason said.

"Yes," she said softly.

She was holding her hands in front of her, vulnerability showing in what was usually an unassailable countenance. He stepped closer, gently taking her hands in his.

"Alright," he said.

"Alright?" she asked.

"Not really, but yes."

"Just like that?"

"What did you expect?" he asked.

"I don't know. Maybe I thought you'd say that nobles are stupid and do something reckless and impulsive."

"That would only hurt you and accomplish nothing," he said. "Take it from someone who let a failed relationship drive a wedge between him and his family."

He leaned in, gently kissed her and stepped back, letting go of her hands. His eyes glistened with tears but he had a familiar, impish grin.

"You're going to miss me, Cassandra Mercer."

"I know."

He turned and walked away, without looking back.

Chapter 126:

Poison Pill

It was late morning, the sun high in the sky. Clive arrived at the cloud palace, finding someone standing near the platform that touched the shore.

"Acolyte Pellin," he greeted.

"Mister Standish," she greeted in return.

"Are you waiting for something?" he asked.

"I'm waiting for Mr Asano," she said. "I'm going to deliver a gift from my goddess, as promised."

"Jason has been gone for almost two weeks," Clive said. "I take it, as an acolyte of Knowledge, that you know something I don't."

"He's on the Adventure Society campus right now," she said. "He's speaking with Cassandra Mercer and will be done shortly."

Clive looked up at the towering cloud palace.

"Then I think I'll wait as well," he said. "My days have been busy, but I can spare a few minutes. It must be an odd experience, having knowledge placed into your mind by your goddess."

"I'm told the sensation is similar to using a skill book," Gabrielle said. "I've never used one myself but it's gentler than a skill book, from what I'm told. The goddess doesn't impart so much information at once."

"I always imagined it would be disconcerting," he said. "I've spent so much of my life in pursuit of knowledge that having it just turn up in my head would be quite alarming."

"The goddess is aware of your pursuit, Mr Standish, and she loves you for it."

"Oh, um... thanks?"

"He's here," she said, turning away from Clive.

Clive followed her gaze to spot, spotting Jason and becoming slightly alarmed at what he saw. Jason was still wearing his battle robes, which he rarely did in the city. His gaze was normally sharp and focused or roaming and observant, but today he looked puffy-eyed and disoriented.

"I don't suppose your goddess told you if he's been drinking?" Clive asked.

"He hasn't," Gabrielle said. "Cassandra Mercer just ended their relationship."

"Oh," Clive said sadly, then turned a narrow gaze on Gabrielle. "I think I'm starting to understand why Jason complains about your goddess and privacy."

Gabrielle gave Clive a disapproving glare.

“She is Knowledge,” Gabrielle said. “Knowledge is hers to disseminate as she sees fit.”

Jason drew closer, giving Clive a sad and tired smile.

“G’day Clive; it’s been a while.”

He greeted Gabrielle with a nod. “Acolyte.”

“Mr Asano.”

Jason turned back to Clive.

“They must be keeping you busy at the Magic Society by now.”

“They are,” Clive said. “I don’t have answers, yet, but I’m making progress.”

“How’s your new assistant?”

“She has some unusual gaps in her knowledge, but she works hard and learns fast. Everything I could hope for.”

“Good. Have they been talking about bringing in more astral magic specialists?”

“Haven’t you heard?” Clive asked.

“Heard what?” Jason asked. “I’ve been chasing monsters through wetlands for two weeks.”

“The events in our astral space were not unique. There have been incidents in other astral spaces all around the world.”

“That’s disturbing,” Jason said. His unfocused expression grew sharp as his muddled brain started turning over.

“It explains why there were no opponents above silver in ours for an operation of that scale,” he said. “Whoever they are, they needed their high-rankers for the high-magic areas. There was no reason to anticipate gold-rank adventurers here, so they could save them for other regions.”

“That’s been the consensus,” Clive said. “At least it means that if I don’t manage to unveil their intentions, many others are working on the problem elsewhere.”

“Don’t talk yourself down, Clive,” Jason said. “If you’re not convinced you have the goods, I’ll be convinced for you. You’ll get there.”

“Thank you,” Clive said. “Look, I have to go speak with Rufus but I wanted to check in on you. You’ve had people worried, taking off without a word like that.”

“Sorry,” Jason said. “I’m fine, as you see.”

“Yes,” Clive said, unconvinced. “It’s good to see you back.”

Clive cast an uncertain gaze at Gabrielle.

“I’m sorry about Cassandra, Jason.”

Jason’s face went very still, then turned slowly on the acolyte.

“Thank you, Clive,” he said, voice flinty as his eyes locked onto Gabrielle. “Come find me when you have some free time. We’ll get a drink.”

“It may be a little while but that sounds good,” Clive said. He set out across the cloud bridge to enter the palace.

“I shouldn’t have told him that,” Gabrielle said apologetically.

“You shouldn’t even know about it. I know I’ve been jokey about your goddess and her privacy issues but she had no right to tell you that.”

Gabrielle’s expression went stiff.

“She’s a goddess, Mr Asano. She has whatever rights she wants.”

“I’d respond to that, but she already knows what I have to say because I do. In case she doesn’t tell you, it involved a lot of bad language and several physiologically implausible suggestions.”

“You should show her more respect.”

“Respect is earned.”

“She earned it by being a goddess.”

“That’s a tyrant’s reasoning. If you’ll excuse me, I’m leaving.”

“Wait. I came here to give you something.”

She had a small satchel slung over her shoulder, from which she took a wooden case. Holding it out, she opened it to reveal three objects in the padded interior. Two were awakening stones and the other a small stone square. It looked similar to the world-phoenix token in Jason’s inventory, but a washed-out blue colour instead of vibrant red.

“She knows that you will confront the people responsible for the death of your friend,” Gabrielle said. “She expects you to encounter them more than once. She chose a gift that would better prepare you for those encounters.”

Jason touched a hand to the first awakening stone.

Item: [Divine Awakening Stone of Inevitability] (transcendent rank, epic)

An awakening stone crafted by a god to bestow a specific aura power. (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Doom essence, unawakened doom essence ability, no aura essence ability.
 - Effect: Awakens the aura essence ability [Inescapable Doom].
 - You have 3 unawakened essence abilities.
 - You do not meet the requirements to use this item.
-

Jason frowned at the description, which troubled him in several regards. He focused on the listed ability.

Ability: [Inevitable Demise] (Doom)

- Aura (magic).
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Effect (iron): Enemies within the aura have any affliction immunities, including inherent immunities, treated as complete resistance. This resistance can be reduced by ordinary resistance-reduction effects. This is a magic effect.

He wasn't able to use the stone as each person could only awaken the one aura. Presuming the tablet was some kind of solution to that, it was the next object he touched. the square tablet.

Item: [Soul-Purgation Tablet (aura)] (transcendent rank, legendary)

???. (consumable, ???).

- Effect: ???.
- Uses remaining: 1/1.
- You meet the requirements to use this item. Use Y/N?

Like the world-phoenix token, this item was too powerful for Jason's ability to discern its characteristics. After looking at it for a moment, the description changed.

Item: [Soul-Purgation Tablet (aura)] (transcendent rank, legendary)

A tablet with the power to remove an aura essence ability. Cannot be forcibly used on another by any means. (consumable, soul-shaping).

- Requirements: Awakened aura essence ability.
- Effect: Removes an existing aura essence ability.
- Uses remaining: 1/1.

- **Warning:** Information on this ability has been provided by an outside source and cannot be verified.

- You meet the requirements to use this item. Use Y/N?

He didn't even realise that removing an essence ability was even possible, unless it was a god taking away what they'd given out themselves. After looking over the description for a moment, he touched the second awakening stone.

Item: [Divine Awakening Stone of Persistence] (transcendent rank, rare)

An awakening stone crafted by a god to bestow a specific spell. (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Dark essence, unawakened dark essence ability.
 - Effect: Awakens the spell essence ability [Dark Descent].
 - You have 3 unawakened essence abilities.
 - You meet the requirements to use this item. Use Y/N?
-

Jason checked the ability.

Ability: [Curse of Isolation] (Dark)

- Spell (curse, magic).
 - Cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.
 - Effect (iron): This spell cannot be resisted. Periodically inflicts an instance of [Dark Descent]; this is a curse effect.
 - [Dark Descent] (affliction, magic, stacking): Target has their perception distance, the effect of their perception ability and resistance to all afflictions reduced by a small amount. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

The three items would make Jason much more effective against enemies immune to his afflictions. Various types of monsters were not flesh and blood, but the abilities the two stones offered would allow him to act as if they were. Given the army of constructs he heard about from the expedition members, if he really did encounter them then such abilities would be immensely useful.

"According to the goddess," Gabrielle said, "your current abilities are ill-suited to your fated enemies. These gifts were crafted by her specifically to rectify this. She said you would recognise their usefulness."

"Yeah," he said. "It's a shiny red apple, alright."

He snapped the case shut in Gabrielle's hands.

"Thanks, but no thanks. She chose the moment to offer me this, didn't she?"

"She said you could use some good news."

"No," he said, voice tired. "She sent you now because I'm emotional and vulnerable to making a rash decision."

Gabrielle glared at Jason.

"My goddess doesn't lie."

"She has all the knowledge in the world and near-infinite power," Jason said. "I bet the god of deceit looks at her with admiration."

Gabrielle shoved the box back into her bag and conjured a heavy iron staff into her hand. She raised the end to just under Jason's chin.

"Watch your words, Jason Asano. I will only tolerate them so far."

He gave her a look of weary disdain. "This is the part where your boss tells you to leave."

She opened her mouth to respond, then froze.

"See?" he asked. "I don't know what possible use I am to her but she wants me for something. For all I know, she's provoking this response because she wants me angry. I'm not stupid enough to think I can out-game her. I do think she made a genuine mistake here, though. She told me once that people constantly surprise her, and I think that's true. She knows everything, but that gives her a blind spot. She is as close to anyone to seeing a person's optimal choice in any situation, yet we constantly act against our own interest. It must drive her crazy."

Gabrielle's agitation was rising while Jason stood in front of her, just looking tired.

"You think to know my goddess? You think she has flaws for the likes of you to see?"

"Sure," Jason said. "Gods are big-picture types, older than we can imagine. I bet they have all kinds of trouble understanding the thoughts of short-lived wretches like us."

"Blasphemer!"

"Yeah," Jason said. "It's kind of my thing."

Again Gabrielle opened her mouth to speak only to stop. Knowledge appeared in person next to Gabrielle, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"That's enough dear," she said. "Time to run along back to the temple."

"Yes, Goddess," Gabrielle said, bowing her head before walking away with an angry stride.

As in their last meeting, the goddess looked like an ordinary person. Despite this, she radiated glory, even with her aura fully suppressed.

"I made a mistake, here," she said.

“Unless that’s what you want me to think,” Jason said.

“You are making a mistake as well,” she said. “The same one Sophie Wexler has been making. Don’t push away an incredible opportunity out of an instinctive mistrust.”

“If I was her, I wouldn’t trust me either.”

“So suspicious. You think my gift is a poison pill.”

“If you wanted to give me something to help me deal with the people who killed Farrah, you could just tell me where to find them.”

“You know better than that,” she said. “If I start telling mortals how to solve all their problems, where does it end? If I tell them how to fix everything, then life becomes a puppet show where I hold all the strings. The other gods would not stand for that and neither would you.”

“I can’t fight a god.”

“We both know it wouldn’t stop you from trying. I may not tell people the things I know, so as to let them lead their lives, but I do make exceptions for my followers.”

“You want me to worship you? You can’t seriously think I would.”

“Don’t be so hasty. Come into my church in full faith and trust and I will tell you about the people who killed Farrah.”

“Don’t say her name.”

“I’ll tell you who killed your friend. Who they are, where they are. What they’re doing and how to stop them. All this I will give you, in return for your faith.”

“You mean obedience.”

“I am not Dominion. In faith to me, there is no obedience; only loyalty. Do not rush to reject this offer. Take the time to consider it objectively. Think of what that knowledge can do. The lives it can save. And that is not the end. Follow me and there is countless good you can do with the knowledge I will gift you.”

“Can I tell Clive about gravity?”

“You don’t understand gravity.”

“Do you?”

“Yes. I can see it.”

“You can see gravity?”

“I’m a goddess.”

“That must suck. Not a lot of hills left to climb. You must feel purposeless.”

“You cannot aggravate me, Jason Asano.”

“That’s the advantage of being mortal; I can set goals. If you want something, you have it.”

“I want you to worship me.”

“I guess you can have goals,” Jason said. “You know what I know, so you know what I think you’re full of, and where I’d like you to stick your offer.”

“You’re letting your heart rule your head. I will give you some time to consider.”

Jason gave a bitter, malevolent laugh.

“This must be frustrating for you,” he said. “You can’t predict my reactions yet know them immediately. You see how every approach you take just pushes me further away. Assuming you’re not trying to push me away for some reason I can’t see because I’m not an all-knowing immortal.”

“We will speak again when you are more reasonable.”

“But that’s why you picked now, right? I’m angry and miserable. Not thinking straight. And here you are with the handy-dandy tools to vent my rage on a nice, deserving target. I hope you really did make a mistake and this isn’t what you wanted. It makes me feel good to think of you realising how wrong this has gone, step by step. But you know that.”

“There will be times in the future when you need me, Jason Asano.”

“You know that, do you? Because it sounds like you’re just guessing.”

“Not many gods would tolerate this kind of insolence.”

“Smite me, then.”

She gave him a sad smile.

“We will talk again, Jason Asano. I hope to find that with a cooler head, you make better choices.”

She vanished, leaving Jason alone.

“I’ve got some bad news for you lady,” he said to the air. “Making bad life choices is kind of my thing.”

“You seem to have a lot of things,” Emir said, suddenly appearing next to Jason.

“I’m versatile,” Jason said. “Does no one in this world respect privacy?”

“A goddess appeared on my doorstep,” Emir said. “Did you really expect me not to take a look?”

“She let you. She wants you to tell Rufus about her offer.”

“That would be ill-advised,” Emir said. “Rufus very much wants vengeance for Farrah. He would push you hard to take the offer, making his friendship another cost of refusal.”

“Yeah, she’s sneaky,” Jason said. “She’ll probably see to it he finds out anyway.”

“What will you do if she does?”

“What I always do,” Jason said. “The best I can with what I have.”

Emir nodded.

“I have some things to talk with you about myself, but now is not the time. You haven’t even really got back yet, standing here on the doorstep. I would appreciate it if you come find me sometime in the next few days.”

“I can do that.”

Chapter 127: Let's Just Fight Monsters

Rufus opened the door to his suite to admit Clive inside.

"I thought you were busy these days," Rufus said.

"I am, which is why I needed a break. Jason's back, by the way. I just saw him outside."

Rufus frowned.

"That boy needs a talking to. You can't just wander off without telling anyone when there are monsters looking to eat you and silver rankers looking to do worse. Not to mention the woman he is meant to be teaching."

"I wouldn't go too hard," Clive said. "Cassandra Mercer just ended things with him."

"Is that why he went off? She's been coming around looking for him, right?"

"No, I mean really just ended things. As in, minutes ago."

"Oh."

"That's not what I'm here for, though," Clive said. He pulled a document folder from his storage space. "I haven't been able to figure out what they were doing in the astral space, yet, but I'm making progress. This is a list of the more unusual and specialised techniques and materials they were employing."

"I don't have any magical knowledge," Rufus said. "I can't help you decipher any of that."

"It's not about finding out what any of these things are for," Clive said, tapping on the folder. "Each of the things I've listed here is rare, distinctive, and can't be sourced locally. They include exotic materials and magical devices requiring specialised knowledge. That gives us three possibilities. Possibility one is that they have a high-ranked portal user. We can ignore that, because it's a dead end for us. The next possibility is the items being bought in via some great overland trek, to maintain secrecy by avoiding anyone."

"That's unlikely," Rufus said. "Unpopulated lands are rife with monsters that go uncultured; nomads that know the territory far better than any interlopers, plus the logistical problems and potential navigation mishaps."

"That leaves smuggling the goods in through the port in Hornis or the one here in Greenstone," Clive said. "That seems like the kind of thing an intrepid and motivated adventurer could look into."

"Yes it does," Rufus said. He took the folder and shook Clive's hand. "Thank you for this."

Clive nodded.

“Let’s just find these people.”

Sophie had been left to her own devices for almost two weeks. Jason had vanished and Belinda was off with Clive all day. She spent some of her time with Rufus, who guided her in the training loop Jason had shown her. He seemed a more comfortable and capable instructor than Jason but was distracted with his own training. There was a frenetic drive to the way he pushed himself to the limit, which at the peak of bronze rank she had no chance to match. He also went out every couple of days to hunt monsters. She asked to join him, but he told her that the monsters he was hunting were the strongest to be found in the area and she should wait for Jason’s return.

She hunted up Emir’s library or, as it turned out, libraries. They turned out to have a disappointing deficit of romantic potboilers. Lacking anything better to do, she finally turned to the meditation techniques Jason had showed her. At first she kept doing things the way that felt right to her, but she would increasingly end a session feeling tense and tired. She started trying things more like he had suggested, less self-conscious about it in his absence.

At first it felt awkward and pointless, although she felt better at the end of each session. Slowly it began to feel more natural, patience and persistence showing slight but noticeable results. She became more comfortable with the power flowing through her. At the start it had felt like a wild beast she needed to forcibly control. With each day she came to understand that greater control came through acceptance that it was a part of her, rather than an external force to be brought forcibly into line.

After two weeks, meditation had become a pleasant and comfortable part of her day. She moved her sessions from the meditation room down the hall from her suite to the terrace that wrapped around the whole guest wing. Unlike the private suite terraces, this was the one anyone with access to the guest wing could make their way onto.

Normally she would choose privacy, but in Belinda’s absence the isolation was starting to eat at her. She was happy for any chance encounter with the palace staff, who were pleasantly absent of agendas.

She was meditating in the warm sunlight when she was interrupted by Jason’s voice.

“I haven’t been a good teacher,” he said. “That was even before I left without a word.”

She opened her eyes and turned to look at him. He looked tired.

“I didn’t sense you coming,” she said.

“The benefits of aura control,” he said. “I’ve been trying too hard to control you, while telling myself I’m helping you.”

From her sitting position she rolled back, then kicked up onto her feet. She looked him up and down, his adventuring gear topped off by a bone-weary face. She had finally been ready to try opening up, only for him to skulk off. She was ready to give him an earful but he genuinely didn’t look up to it. She felt her anger dissipate, wondering if that was a side effect of all the meditation.

“It’s not all on you,” she said. “I’ve been fighting everyone, when I should be picking my enemies.”

“How about we start over?” he suggested. “I’ll show you what I know, and you help me improve where you’re already better.”

“That works out for you,” she said. “I’m better at a lot.”

Her expression had some hesitation to it but was ore open than Jason had seen, with even the ghost of a smile. It was a welcome breakthrough.

“You are better than me at a lot,” he agreed. “You’ve been surviving the hard way your whole life. Six months ago, I was assistant manager at a retail bulk office supplier.”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“Probably for the best,” Jason said. “So what do you say? Fresh start?”

He held out a hand and she shook it.

“I’m willing to try,” she said. “Where do we begin?”

“I’m going to get some rest,” he said. “I just got back and had a series of encounters that didn’t go well for me. Keep doing what you’re doing and tomorrow we’ll go monster hunting.”

“What kind of encounters?”

“I had a fight with my mate’s girlfriend, my girlfriend dumped me, I had a row with a goddess after she tried to scam me out of my aura power and I saw Clive. It wasn’t in that order, and the bit with Clive was fine.”

“What do you mean by a row with a goddess?”

“She’s trying to bait me into worshipping her. I’m not an expert but I’m pretty sure that’s not how worship is meant to work and we had an argument about it.”

“You mean an actual goddess?”

“Yeah, Knowledge. I assume you’ve heard of her.”

“She’s a goddess, Asano; of course I’ve heard of her. You expect me to believe that an actual goddess came down to try and recruit you to her church.”

“Sounds shady, right? Ask Emir. He was watching the whole thing, or the end, at least. Right now, I’m going to find a comfy cloud bed and try to not think about my girlfriend kicking me to the curb.”

Sophie shook her head in disbelief.

“You’re a lot to take,” she told him. “I don’t know if you’re telling the truth or lying, and I don’t know which is more insane.”

“I’m from another universe,” Jason said with a shrug. “I’m pretty sure this is my life now. Welcome aboard.”

He gestured behind him with his thumb.

“I’m going to go get some sleep.”

“It’s not even lunch time.”

“It turns out the night time was inside me all along.”

“What?”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Wexler. Get ready to fight some monsters.”

Soon after, Jason was in his suite, smoke swirling around him as his clothes changed. His battle robes were replaced with a pair of silken boxers and he walked out to the balcony terrace. He took a bottle of alcohol from his inventory.

Item: [Shimmer Beet Rum] (bronze rank, common)

An alcoholic beverage brewed by the Norwich Distillery of Greenstone City. (consumable, poison).

➤ Effect: Inflicts [alcohol].

It was something he kept in his inventory for Cassandra. He pulled back his arm to throw it in the ocean but stopped and took a deep drink, straight from the bottle.

➤ Special attack [Shimmer Beet Rum] has inflicted [Alcohol] on you.

The bronze-rank beverage managed to get past his resistance, and it went down rough. Jason liked his drinks smooth and sweet, avoiding straight spirits. He looked at the bottle in his hands and took another swig.

“You look awful,” Sophie said as Jason staggered past her to fall into a soft chair. Jason replied with an incoherent groan.

“What happened to going straight to bed?” she asked. “It seems like you detoured to the liquor cabinet.”

“I needed some sleepy medicine,” he said.

“Quite a lot of it, it seems.”

“Is he hung over?” Belinda asked coming out of her bedroom and looking at Jason.

“His lady friend dropped him,” Sophie said.

Belinda looked at the line of drool dropping from the semi-conscious Jason’s mouth.

“He’s taking it well. The same day a goddess yelled at him, too.”

For her own edification, Sophie had taken Jason’s advice and sought out Emir for confirmation.

“He certainly keeps exciting company,” Emir had told her the night before. “I mean, look at us; we’re no deities, but still. A professional thief and a gold-rank adventurer? The most exciting person I knew at iron-rank was a guy named Brian who could conjure a huge metal duck.”

She had told Belinda the whole story after coming back from speaking to Emir.

“Wasn’t Asano meant to take you out and fight a monster?” Belinda asked, looking at Jason’s slumped form.

“We’re still doing that,” Jason slurred.

“I’m not sure you’re in any state to be fighting,” Sophie said.

“It’s fine,” Jason said. “I contacted a friend of mine to come along. He’ll keep you safe better than I could anyway.”

“Another ludicrously well-connected young scion?” Belinda asked. “It’s not that girl whose grandmother owned the whole section of town I grew up in, is it?”

“Beth? She’s more of an acquaintance. Humphrey’s from the Geller family. Have you heard of them?”

“Seriously?”

“I just hope he doesn’t yell at me. I had a fight with his girlfriend.”

“Blasphemy, Jason?”

“Not so loud, Humphrey.”

“She said you were proud of it!”

“If I lie and say I wasn’t, will you chastise more quietly?”

Humphrey had met Jason and Sophie outside the jobs hall.

“I though alcohol didn’t work on you?” Humphrey asked.

“I used the bronze-rank stuff.”

“Why would you do that?”

“His lady friend broke things off,” Sophie said. “Right before he met with your lady friend, from what I gather. She’s the acolyte, right?”

“That’s right,” Humphrey said.

“Her god chose that exact moment to put your friend in Asano’s path,” Sophie said. “I’m not going to speak ill of the gods but she should have seen how that would go.”

“According to my mother, gods sometimes have trouble understanding the behaviour of people. A matter of perspective, she says. I’m sorry about Cassandra, Jason. Was it her family over the demotion?”

“Yeah.”

“I lost my second star as well, but that’s not too bad at iron rank. You and my mother got it worse.”

“Danielle got demoted?”

“Three stars down to two. At silver rank, that’s worse than losing two stars at iron.”

They went in and Humphrey made for the jobs board while Sophie was surprised by the man behind the desk.

“Bert?”

After Humphrey picked out an appropriate contract, they left the Adventure Society campus via the loop line. Jason’s gaze was fixed on the floor after looking through the windows made his stomach turn.

“I think this is the first time I’ve ridden the loop without a disguise,” Sophie said.

“Why would you wear a disguise?” Humphrey asked.

“Usually because I was on my way to or from stealing something,” Sophie said.

“Stealing something?”

“Didn’t I tell you?” Jason asked, eyes still locked on the floor. “While everyone was off on the expedition, I caught that thief everyone was talking about. This is her.”

“Why are you training her to be an adventurer?”

“Who did you think I was?” Sophie asked.

“Clive told me Jason was helping the friend of his new assistant become an adventurer,” Humphrey said.

“True, if incomplete,” Jason said. “Nice one, Clive.”

“You stole my aunt’s necklace, right off her neck,” Humphrey said to Sophie.

“Did she get it back?” Sophie asked.

“Yes,” Humphrey said. “We caught some criminal trying to sell it.”

“Not smart,” Sophie said. “High-specificity goods like that you sell in another city. Of course, we were picking stupid fences on purpose. Didn’t make any money on it, though. Takes costly preparation to rob people like you, and something that hot doesn’t sell worth a damn.”

“Speaking of another city,” Humphrey said, “Jonah and his new team were found in Hornis.”

“Wait, what?” Jason asked. “Hornis? Jonah has a new team? What about Rick? And why did you need to find him?”

“We haven’t really seen each other since the memorials have we?” Humphrey said. “I’m surprised you haven’t heard, though.”

“I’ve been away,” Jason said.

“Right,” Humphrey said. “I remember hearing one of my cousins said they met you out in the delta.”

“Let’s just fight monsters for now,” Jason said. “We can catch up when there isn’t a little man attempting to pickaxe his way out of my brain.”

Chapter 128: Damage You Shouldn't Walk Away From

Since Humphrey lacked extended movement powers and Jason's stomach lacked a tolerance for movement powers, they hitched a ride into the delta on a trade wagon for a spirit coin each. Using supply crates as furniture, they bounced along in the back of the wagon, Jason looking decidedly peaky.

They had stopped at Jory's clinic to pick up potions, at which point Jason discovered there was no easy hangover cure. Jory explained that he had one for regular hangovers, but trying it on a hangover from iron or bronze rank booze would only make things worse. It was akin to using a potion too soon after already having used one, or using a potion right after using a high-ranked spirit coin. Jason had experienced that himself, which had felt even worse than he did from the hangover.

"I think I've been spoiled by the cloud palace," Sophie said, shifting uncomfortably on her crate.

"I'd love to take a real look," Humphrey said. "I've only seen it at a distance during the memorials."

"I'm pretty sure Emir wouldn't mind you having a look around," Jason said. "What were you saying earlier, about Jonah quitting Ricks team?"

"There were five people in the expedition whose tracking stones failed," Humphrey said. "They were all found, but close to death."

"I know the ones," Jason said. "Emir wanted them watched at the recovery camp but never said why. Everything was chaos. It was Jonah, Thadwick Mercer and three I don't know. Cassandra told me about the rumours. Back before she dumped me. Were these rumours just because of the tracking stone thing?"

"It was where they started," Humphrey said. "Severe injuries have been known to change people's aura, though. Enough that it no longer matches the imprint on their badge and they can't be tracked until they get a new one."

"Is that common?" Jason asked.

"Not at all," Humphrey said. "One person experiencing that would be extraordinary. Five all at once? Beyond unlikely."

"So people think something was done to them," Jason said.

"Yes," Humphrey said. "It started on the way back to the city. They were all behaving differently to how they were before. You could pass it off as an after-effect of a brush with death, but the changes became more prominent over time, not less."

"I helped peel what was left of their clothes off them," Jason said. "They went through the kind of damage you shouldn't walk away from. It would be weird if they weren't affected."

"This wasn't just trauma," Humphrey said. "Jonah was like a different person. He was always loyal to his team, which was what happened to him in the astral space. He held off the enemy to buy time. Now he looks at them and it's like he doesn't see them. He left the team without so much as a word; he just went to the Adventure Society and had his name stricken from the team listing. He and the other four formed a new team of their own, spending all their time together."

"I will acknowledge that's waving a few pod-people red flags," Jason said.

"Pod people?" Sophie asked.

"You know. Creepy parasite thing that gets inside you and takes over."

"Is that something that happens?" she asked in horror.

"Nothing is impossible with magic," Humphrey said.

"Surely they got checked out?" Jason asked.

"They all refused," Humphrey said. "Neither the Adventure Society or the Magic Society has the right to forcibly subject them to examination without some complicated legal wrangling."

"I can't believe your mother would let it rest at that. Not when it involves a family member or an expedition she was in charge of."

"No," Humphrey said. "She didn't tell me much, beyond that steps are being taken. Before it came together, though, all five up and vanished. They were found a week later in Hornis, on a boat bound for distant shores."

"They were making a run for it?" Sophie asked. "You can't just slip out of the city and make off to Hornis when people are watching you. Believe me, I've looked into it. You either have to get passage through the port here or make an overland run through some very empty and inhospitable territory."

"Beaufort Mercer was facilitating them," Humphrey said.

"Thadwick's father," Jason said.

"Yes," Humphrey said. "My mother didn't say it explicitly, but she at least implied that Beaufort's wife was the one who tipped her off. They've been friends since they were young and I think she's at least as concerned for her son as Mother is for Jonah."

"Less interested in the family reputation than whether something is wrong with her child," Jason surmised. "Good on her."

“The Adventure Society sent that portal user who works for Emir Bahadir to send them back, although I'm not sure how willingly,” Humphrey said. “In the meantime, Mother wants me to replace Jonah on Rick's team.”

“Doesn't Rick himself already fill the armoured striker role?” Jason asked.

“Yes. They lost a ranged damage-dealer and a specialised defender. I'm not what they need. I have no idea why Mother wants me to join.”

Humphrey looked inquisitively at Jason.

“You do better than most at recognising her intentions,” Humphrey said. “What do you think?”

“I think she doesn't want you to join Rick's team at all.”

Humphrey let out a frustrated sigh.

“Always a lesson with her. So what does she really want me to do?”

“Best guess? Form your own team. Whoever it was you fought in the astral space, they're still out there. I reckon she wants people you can rely on around you for the next disaster. Also, she probably wants you to find a new front-liner for Rick.”

“She could do that herself; she doesn't need me.”

“And have you miss the chance to make some adventurer connections? Come on, Humphrey.”

Humphrey let out a groan.

“You know you sound like her sometimes,” he said.

“So who can fill the slot in Rick's team?” Jason asked.

“I don't know,” Humphrey said. “There are plenty of specialist defenders around but the only one I can think of who could stack up to Jonah is Hudson Kettering. There's no chance of peeling him out of Beth Cavendish's team.”

“No one else?” Jason asked.

“The only other person who might stack up would be Hudson's cousin, Dustin, but he's...”

Realisation dawned on Humphrey's face.

“He's what?” Jason asked.

“He's been stuck following Thadwick around,” Humphrey said. “Thadwick formally annulled that team, though.”

“One of Thadwick's lackeys? Even Rufus thinks they've got the goods. You should snatch him up for Rick before Thadwick's stink washes off and people start knocking on his door.”

Humphrey frowned.

“I wish I’d realised,” he said. “I could have spoken to Dustin before I met up with you, and now we’re heading out into the delta.”

“We’re still pretty close to the city,” Jason said. “Let me see what I can do.”

Jason checked his contacts list, which consisted of anyone he had a reasonable interaction with. This made for a long list, which he could, fortunately, organise into groups. Hudson Kettering had appeared on the adventurers list, along with the rest of Beth Cavendish’s team, when Jason had temporarily joined it for the sand barge assault. They were close enough to the city that Hudson was in range and Jason sent a voice chat request.

“Jason,” Hudson said by way of greeting. He had used Jason’s voice chat before and wasn’t surprised by it. Humphrey and Sophie were in Jason’s party and could hear his voice as well.

“Morning, Hudson,” Jason said. “I’m here with Humphrey Geller. He wants to talk to you about your cousin.”

“Dustin? If this is about probing him over Thadwick being mind-controlled or whatever, he doesn’t want to hear it.”

“That’s not it,” Humphrey said. “Good morning, Hudson. I was wondering if Dustin would have any interest in joining Rick Geller’s team. They need a quality frontman and they understand what it’s like to have one of their team members placed under suspicion.”

“Join a Geller team?” Hudson pondered. “That’s a good name to be attached to, but so was Mercer. He really took a hit for the family, being stuck to Thadwick, so we only want the best for him this time around. Real adventurers.”

“Rick is the real thing,” Humphrey said. “He’s practically obsessed with becoming stronger. I should point out that it isn’t really a Geller team anymore, though. One left to join Thadwick and they lost someone during the expedition. That leaves Rick and a pair of elf sisters.”

“Sorry to hear it,” Hudson said soberly. “We got lucky; those Vitesse adventurers covered us and paid the price. They’re friends of yours, right, Jason?”

“Yes.”

“There wasn’t a memorial for her,” Hudson said. “Her standing strong is the reason my team all got out alive and we wanted to pay our respects.”

“They’re taking her home for that,” Jason said. “We’re going to have an informal wake once things calm down, though. I’ll let you know.”

“Thanks. Humphrey, I’ll put it to Dustin and see what he thinks. I think you’ll pretty much have him once I tell him about the elf sisters.”

While Jason and Humphrey were off introducing Sophie to monster hunting, Rufus marched through the Adventure Society administration building. In the main lobby he made for the elevating platform to the upper levels. Standing next to the platform was a man in the robes of the church of knowledge, waiting patiently.

“Mr Remore,” the priest greeted him.

Rufus sighed.

“I’m busy, but your goddess knows that. State your purpose.”

“Your business is in pursuit of the people who struck down your precious team mate,” the priest said. He had a friendly look about him, his bronze rank and middle-aged appearance meant he was likely sixty or seventy years old. His voice had a sympathy that sounded completely genuine; the empathy of a clergyman.

“Unless your goddess wants to tell me who they are and where to find them, we have no business.”

“She has offered that and more to someone you count as a friend, yet that friend spurned her offer.”

The frown on Rufus’ face told the priest that Rufus was far from willing to be jerked around.

“You have my attention,” Rufus said.

“Jason Asano was offered all the answers you seek, but he refused.”

“Why?”

“You know the man,” the priest said. “You know he can be mistrusting toward figures of authority.”

“What was the condition?” Rufus asked.

“Condition?” the priest asked.

“He wouldn’t refuse if all she did was offer. What did she ask in return.”

“The goddess knows all. There are tribulations ahead and Asano will need guidance to navigate them successfully. She wishes to offer that guidance.”

“Worship,” Rufus said. “She offered to hand Farrah’s killers up on a plate in return for worship.”

“This goes well beyond the people who killed your friend,” the priest said. “You have heard about incursions in other astral spaces around the world.”

“And what?” Rufus asked tersely. “Your goddess will give up all the answers in return for the worship of one iron-ranker in a provincial city?”

“She sees what others do not. Patterns too large for mortals to notice. For such a small price, she offers such great gains. She was refused but remains patient. The counsel of a friend could do so much good.”

The backhand strike from Rufus landed square on the priest’s mouth, sending him tumbling to the floor. Rufus moved to stand right over him as he looked up, his expression of surprise mirrored by everyone in the lobby. He spoke to the priest in a voice as cold and hard as ice.

“If your goddess is willing to hand over such information, then by what moral stricture does she not? Instead, she looks to ransom a man’s principles. You just tried to turn me on my friend, a man who saved my life, and you have the gall to lay there looking surprised? If you want to help me, then help me. Bring your self-serving ways to me again and you’ll get worse than you got today.”

Rufus strode away, riding the elevation platform up into the building.

Chapter 129: Picking Out the Good Ones

Sophie, Jason and Humphrey left the wagon in the first town they came to. Being the closest to the city, it was a busy distribution hub. Making their way through the town, Sophie was startled at how many people seemed to know Jason. Some would wave, others approaching for a few words of greeting. How Jason kept all the names straight was beyond her.

Sophie observed the difference between how people treated Jason and Humphrey. Jason was approached without reservation and greeted like an old friend. Humphrey was treated with respect and reserve, no one speaking to him unless directly addressed.

“How do you know so many people here?” she asked Jason.

“I’ve passed through quite a few times,” Jason said.

“Surely you have as well,” Sophie asked Humphrey.

“He has,” Jason said. “A lot more than me. The Geller family seat is out in the delta, so Humphrey has been shuttling between the family compound and the family townhouse his whole life. All these people know what a big-shot he is.”

“Don’t they think the same of you?” she asked. “You’re roaming around with him and covered in expensive-looking equipment.”

“They know common when they see it,” Jason said.

On their way to the adventure noticeboard, they found a large group of people queuing up for something.

“The healer must be here today,” Jason said. “It’s good that they’re out and about now. It was really an eye-opener when I heard about Healer showing up at Jory’s place to lay down the law. Forced me to reassess the whole god scenario.”

“That must have been frustrating for you,” Humphrey said. “I know you can be adamant about things.”

“You should always welcome being proven wrong,” Jason said. “It means your understanding of the world just got a little bit better.”

“Says the guy who gets downright obnoxious about being right,” Humphrey said.

“I’m not saying I always welcome being wrong in the moment,” Jason acknowledged. “The important thing is to reflect on it and accept it, going forward.”

They reached the noticeboard and after looking them over, took them all. Plotting out the locations, they mapped an itinerary and set off from the town.

A tentacle wrapped around Sophie's other arm, the first one already being having been caught up. The fleshy blob of the monster's main body sported many, prehensile tentacles and she was running out of limbs. The supple tentacles were studded with sharp, bony protrusions that dug into her skin, lacing her body with cuts as the creature gripped around her arms, legs and torso. Desperately, she bit into a tentacle. Her abilities added damage to any unarmed attack, which turned out to really mean any unarmed attack as her bite severed the monster's thin member. This freed her right arm to attack the tentacle binding her left with a more traditional assault.

Two tentacles severed, the monster withdrew into itself and made for the water.

"No you don't," Sophie told it, rushing forward to grip a tentacle in each hand. With a grunt of effort, she hauled it out of the water. Holding it in place with one hand at the base of a tentacle and her foot pushing down on it, she bent down and brutally pounded its bulbous body with her free fist.

-
- You have defeated [Wetland Tentacloid].
 - 10 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been awarded to you.

Quest: [Notice: Wetland Tentacloid]

- Objective complete: Eliminate [Wetland Tentacloid] 1/1.
- Quest complete.
- 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been awarded to you.

"What spirit coins...ow!"

A bag appeared above her and fell down, bouncing off her head before dropping into the mud.

"What was that?" she complained as she picked up the bag to discover it was full of coins.

"Loot," Jason said with a grin.

"We didn't get rewards, despite being in the group," Humphrey observed.

"I don't think moral support counts as an actual contribution," Jason said.

"Do all adventurers get coins like this?" Sophie asked. "No wonder you're all rich."

"Actually, that's a unique benefit of working with Jason," Humphrey said.

"I'd rather you not spread that around," Jason said. "I don't want people trying to use me as a loot farm. If you had a storage space power, like Humphrey, here, the coins would have gone straight into that."

"You should have Jason store your money until you buy yourself a dimensional bag," Humphrey said. "It's a reward well-earned."

"You really think so?" she asked.

"It was alright," Jason said. "Not great. You're bleeding all over, your clothes are in tatters. You almost let that thing go full hentai monster on you."

"What's a hentai monster?" she asked.

"No idea," Humphrey said. "I will say that I was on the verge of stepping in. Still, it was very good for your first monster hunt."

"Yeah," Jason acknowledged. "For the first time out you did alright. None of those cuts and scrapes are major. I got impaled in my first real monster fight. Luckily, I had a healing power."

"I have one too," Sophie said.

Ability: [Equilibrium] (Balance)

- Special ability.
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Meditate to slowly accrue instances of [Integrity], up to an instance threshold of ([Recovery] attribute +1). Instances quickly drop off when meditation ends.

- [Integrity] (heal-over-time, mana-over-time, stamina-over-time, holy): Periodically recover a small amount of health, stamina and mana. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

They found some dry ground and she sat in a meditation pose to use it. It took time to heal her injuries, but Jason and Humphrey were willing to wait. The more she used it, the quicker the ability would advance.

"I'd give you something to clean yourself off, but you'll be fighting again, soon," Jason said.

"And he doesn't want you to use up his crystal wash," Humphrey said.

The second encounter was less precarious but still far from an ideal showing. Jason reluctantly supplied some crystal wash and fresh clothes from his storage space.

"You'll want to use those coins you're earning on some decent armour," Humphrey said.

"I know a guy who supplies quality light armour," Jason said.

On the way to the next notice location, they arrived in a small village. Once again, Sophie was struck by how many people seemed to know Jason.

"Seriously, Asano, what's going on?"

"I just get around a bit," Jason said.

They stopped for lunch in an open-air eatery that served travelling merchants and passing adventurers. The owner treated Jason like visiting royalty.

"The baby was born two weeks gone, now," the owner told Jason. "Healthy as you like."

"That's good to hear," Jason said.

"If you hadn't been there, I don't know what would have happened," he said.

"I'm sure it would have worked out. You aren't so far from the city that you couldn't have gone for a healer."

"She was so sick, though. I'm not sure how long the baby could take it."

"We got lucky," Jason said. "I should make introductions. Johan, my friends, Humphrey and Sophie. This is Johan, who makes the best fried savoury puffs in the delta."

"Any friends of Jason are more than welcome," he said. "You'll never need take out your purse in my establishment."

Jason ordered for the three of them and Johan went inside to the kitchens.

"Is that's what's going on?" Sophie asked. "You've been out here healing people, like at Jory's clinic?"

"More like curing," Jason said. "I can't heal injuries, just disease and poison. A few other things, but you don't see a lot of curses in villagers."

"Jason does it quite a lot," Humphrey said. "During our field assessment for the Adventure Society, he was always holding the group up."

"They let him stop for that?" Sophie asked.

"You try telling a crowd of sick people that you're too busy to help them," Humphrey said. "In this one village there was a huge crowd and we were there all morning. The locals put on this big midday feast, which was actually really nice."

"Those stops are less time-consuming now," Jason said, "and often not necessary at all. The priests of the Healer are a lot more active since Healer replaced them all. They stopped charging for services, too, so people aren't reliant on the chance I'll be passing through."

"The new attitude of the local Healer church has caused some disarray amongst the nobles," Humphrey said. "Until Healer replaced his whole clergy, the church was largely at the beck and call of the noble families. Now they're treated the same as the general populace and there's been a lot of dissatisfaction."

"There's a lot of disruption to the upper crust going on lately," Jason said. "First the healers, then the expedition, now these rumours about Jonah, Thadwick and the others."

“Not to mention the inquiry,” Humphrey said. “Did you hear the entire Phael family had their Adventure Society membership revoked? Every one of them, even the silver-ranker.”

“I only dealt with them in the expedition support camp,” Jason said, “but even that left a nasty taste in the mouth. If the rest were like the ones I met, it’s not much of a surprise.”

While they waited for the food to come out, they discussed Sophie's performance against the monsters. Fighting humans in a city was very different to fighting monsters in marshes and swamps. Whether in a fighting pit or a dark alley, the footing was usually solid in a city.

The delta had slick mud, deceptively deep bog, random obstructions and plenty of places to hide or retreat into. Sophie had no experience fighting in such an environment, while the monsters were well-adapted to the locations in which they spawned. The elements that hurt her were things they could use to their advantage.

The inhuman appearance of monsters made it harder for her to read their intentions, which slowed her reactions. Their monstrous forms made many of her favoured attacks pointless, forcing her to use long-dismissed elements of her style. These were techniques she had barely thought about since her father had first taught them to her.

It wasn't just their physical form that was an issue. Monsters lacked the doubt and hesitation of a more thoughtful opponent and she came to realise how much she relied on mind games in a fight. They were also possessed of a bloody determination, tenaciously fighting on after a human would have given up.

The final thing hurting her in the fights was that she was still getting used to her new abilities. She had been working on shifting her style to take best advantage of them, but it was still early days.

“What we’ve seen today has been good,” Jason said. “Obviously, there’s room for improvement but this is day one. We’re building a list of what we need to work on, which will show us where to focus the training. You and I fight the same way, but you’ve had more practice against people, where I’ve used it more against monsters. We can help each other.”

After lunch, they set out for the third and final job they had taken from the adventure board notice. After that would come the job they took from the jobs hall, which should take them into the evening.

“Do adventurers all run around doing this many jobs at once?” Sophie asked.

“Not at all,” Humphrey said. “It’s one way of picking out the good ones. They’re on the job a lot and they hit-up multiple contracts. That’s true at iron-rank, anyway. At higher

ranks, it pays to give your contracts more caution and consideration, matching the jobs you take to your abilities.”

“That’s getting ahead of ourselves,” Jason said. “Let’s just concentrate on getting her into the Adventure Society, for now.”

He turned to Sophie.

“You get to choose the kind of adventurer you want to be,” he told her. “If you want to throw yourself into it and push your abilities to the limit, that’s great. If you want to just be a nominal member and never actually hunt monsters, that’s alright too.”

“No,” Sophie said. “I never thought I would have the chance to get a full set of essences. I want to see how far this can take me.”

“Me too,” Jason said. “Humphrey already knows because his Mum told him.”

“Hey,” Humphrey protested.

“You do talk about your mother a lot,” Sophie said, “and I’ve only known you since this morning.”

Chapter 130: Events Loom Large

Rufus arrived at Arella's office and knew she wasn't there when the door didn't swing itself open at his approach. He knocked and it was opened by the deputy director. Rufus had few dealings with the elderly elf, Genevieve. He had heard she was the one person Arella completely trusted, but he'd heard a lot about the director that turned out to be false.

"Something I can help you with, Mr Remore?" she asked.

"I was looking for the director."

"She was called away on important business. Perhaps I can be of assistance?"

"Not unless you can introduce me to her father and help convince him to assist me."

"Oh, I can probably manage that," she said, to Rufus' visible surprise. "I'm a little busy to go along, but find your way to his home and I'll have someone waiting for you."

In a one-room ritual building on the Geller estate grounds, a portal opened. Jonah Geller stumbled through, as if shoved, followed by the bronze-rank Ernest Geller. The portal closed behind them. The ritual room had been marked off-limits for weeks, with no household staff allowed to enter. Only Rick Geller had been trusted by Danielle to keep watch, having supplied him with a comfortable chair and a stack of books on a side table.

Rick put his book down and stood up at the appearance of the others, gaze fixed on Jonah. He looked for anything in the big man's expression he recognised but it was like looking at a different man. Like someone else was wearing his friend's face.

"You have no right to do this," Jonah said to Ernest, ignoring Rick's presence.

"So you keep saying," Ernest said, voice and body language both equally unyielding. "You will stay here until we're done with you."

"Jonah," Rick said. Jonah turned, looking at Rick as if he were no more connected to him than the chair Rick had been sitting in.

"Please just tell me what happened to you," Rick implored. "You know I'll do whatever I can to help. The way you've done for me, more than once."

"Then get me out of here," Jonah said. "They want to cut me open."

"Don't listen to him," Ernest said. "He'll say anything to make us let him go."

Jonah threw a look of bile at Ernest.

"You have no idea what you're dealing with."

"You're right," Ernest said. "That's the whole reason we're here. Rick, you were here to announce our arrival to Danielle, yes?"

“That’s right.”

“Double check the locks before you go,” Ernest said. “Make sure they’re all locked from the outside.”

The Geller family compound had been heavily landscaped to be on solid, secure ground. The meandering creeks, picturesque garden ponds and even the small lake might seem like natural waterways but had been artfully and carefully designed centuries ago. There was a section of river that had been diverted into what looked like a natural stretch of river but was actually a canal that diverted it through the estate before returning to its original course. Between construction and growing-in the gardens, it had been the work of generations to get the estate to the impressive and natural-seeming state it was currently in.

Clive was aware of all this, the Geller family having detailed the process and donated copies of the records to the Magic Society. Only the numerous security features, developed and improved upon over centuries had been withheld. As he drove an airboat through the delta, he loudly explained it to Belinda, who was sitting behind Clive’s rune tortoise familiar, Onslow. It was an unusual experience for Clive to have someone share his interest in magical esoterica.

Clive steered the airboat up to the estate’s water gate and coasted to a stop. The archway that framed the gate was smaller than the one in the Greenstone city wall, but the portcullised arch was still imposing. This was especially true as the Geller portcullis was usually closed, unlike the city gate, which placed the imposing metal grill on full display.

The guards on station, on a small stone dock with a booth, came out to question Clive. As he was expected, they swiftly allowed him to continue, magically raising the portcullis to admit his airboat onto the estate. Belinda gaped as they passed through the stone arch.

Shortly beyond the wall was a larger stone dock nestled into the embankment, where the Gellers stored their inland watercraft. There was an attendant in another bamboo booth who waved them into an empty slip and tied off the vehicle. Once they were on shore, the man took their details in a small notebook and gave them directions.

As much as they would have liked to explore, Clive and Belinda had come with an important purpose and stuck to the main paths. Using the sedate pace of Clive’s familiar as an excuse, though, they did have the time to at least look around. Clive occasionally glanced back to check on his familiar, who kept stopping to snack on the shrubbery.

“Onslow, stop that! We are guests, here!”

They followed the directions they had been given along the main pathway, which constantly tempted with detours. They finally arrived at the main house complex to find an august company outside, even by Geller family standards.

Talking together were Emir Bahadir, Thalia Mercer, Elspeth Arella and the stern-faced head of the Adventure Society inquiry team. With them was a priest of the god of purity, who looked older than most but was clean-faced and looked very hale. Clive wasn't conversant in the robe designs of the church of purity but the elaborate outfit implied considerable rank almost as much as the company he kept. Danielle Geller was with them, playing host. As Clive stood off, giving quiet introductions to Belinda, Emir spotted them and quietly pointed them out to Danielle. She walked over to greet them.

"You must be Humphrey's Magic Society friend, Clive. I hear good things."

"Thank you, Ma'am. This is my assistant, Belinda."

Danielle gave her an appraising look.

"I take it you find helping Clive a less antagonistic pursuit than running around robbing people," Danielle said.

"It was my friend who did the running," Belinda said. "As for antagonism, a few cash-heavy theatre-goers hardly compare to an army of weaponised magical constructs."

Danielle chuckled.

"A well-made point. So, Clive, you're our resident astral magic specialist?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"I was surprised you were ready this fast."

"We've been working hard," Clive said, including Belinda with a glance. "This is important. It's a lot of responsibility."

"Indeed it is," Danielle said. "Exciting times are dangerous ones. We have something I can't talk about right now going on, so you'll have to forgive my not attending to you personally. I'll have one of my family members give you access to the mirage chamber."

"Thank you," Clive said.

"I've completely cleared the schedule for the mirage chamber; it's yours for the day. If you need more time, just tell us and I'll see you get it. Did you bring everything you need?"

"Yes," Clive said, his tone leaving no room for doubt. "Our preparations were quite thorough," Clive said.

"Good. I'll find young Rick to show you the way; he's wandering about here, somewhere. Have you met Rick, Clive?"

"I have, Lady Geller. At the picnic in the park, after the sand barge assault."

“Of course. Jason can be something of an explosive factor, socially speaking, but when it comes to throwing a truly casual affair, he comes into his own. Rick is reliable and trustworthy. He doesn’t know what’s going on here, yet, but I would appreciate you not asking, anyway. He has a personal stake in ongoing events.”

“Of course,” Clive said. “Does he have the might essence, by any chance? Or earth, iron; anything that gives him a strength power.”

“He has the might essence,” Danielle said. “Do you need some heavy lifting done?”

“Yes,” Clive said. “I’ve looked over the design of your mirage chamber and it has the old stone-slab control configuration. It’s no doubt why it held up so well over so long but I’ll need to take the top off make some required upgrades.”

“You want to upgrade our mirage chamber?”

“It’s quite necessary for what I need to do with it,” Clive said.

“Do you have the expertise to carry that out?” Danielle asked.

Clive looked at her, nonplussed.

“It doesn’t take any real expertise.”

“My people have assured me that any upgrade would very much require both expertise and some prohibitive material costs.”

“I suppose it comes down to what you think constitutes expertise,” Clive said. “I can see how it could be expensive if you did it wrong. As in, very wrong. I won’t. I checked the requisite materials out of the Magic Society storehouse and charged everything to the Adventure Society. It was cheap enough that it fell within my discretionary budget. All the expensive materials in a mirage chamber are in the dome, which I don’t need to touch. It should take me less than a couple of hours.”

“Have you worked on a mirage chamber before?” Danielle asked.

“I assisted in the complete rebuilds of the mirage chambers in Boko and Hornis and still do annual maintenance. The original construction wasn’t as lasting as your stone setup.”

“Boko and Hornis have their own Magic Society people,” Danielle said.

“Yes,” Clive said.

“And they call you in anyway?”

“Yes.”

Danielle gave Clive an assessing look.

“You’re one of those people, aren’t you?” she asked. “The ones who are just very quietly exceptional at what they do.”

“I don’t know I’d say that,” Clive said, scratched his head awkwardly.

“You’re kind of the opposite of Jason. He’s full of potential but runs around causing huge messes because he’s headstrong and inexperienced. You’re forming a team with my son, right?”

“We’ve never really discussed it.”

“Well, now you don’t need to,” Danielle said. “I’m going to have you looked into and if everything checks out, you’ll be part of my boy’s team.”

“I don’t think you get to decide that,” Clive said uncertainly. “We get to form our own teams.”

“Don’t be silly,” Danielle said. “Of course I get to decide that. Now, wait here while I go find Rick.”

Clive looked nonplussed at the retreating figure of Danielle as she went into the house.

“That felt oddly like talking to Jason, there at the end,” he mused.

Sophie was feeling good after her third monster encounter. It had been a group of ratlings pillaging a farming crop. While not exactly humanoid, they were close, and she fought them on flat, open ground. At first, they had swarmed her but their opportunistic aggression lacked cohesion. Her swiftness and agility let her avoid being encircled, catch one exposed and make short work of it. Cowardly by nature, the others scattered. They were only quick compared to someone other than Sophie, who chased them down one by one.

That only left the contract from the jobs hall, but en route, they passed through a village where they were approached by a harried teamster. He recognised them as adventurers from their equipment and informed them of a trap weaver nest close to a major trading road.

“Trap weavers?” Sophie asked.

“Nasty, spider-like monsters,” Humphrey said. “Dangerous and unfortunately common in the delta. We should clear them out now.”

“Yep,” Jason agreed. “I’ll do it.”

“You aren’t exactly in the best shape today,” Humphrey said.

“The fight doesn’t wait until you’re ready, Humphrey. A little impairment training will do me good.”

“Can I do it?” Sophie asked.

“No,” Jason and Humphrey said together.

"You think he can do it," Sophie said, "and he's hungover. He's not that much better than me."

"Yes, he is," Humphrey said. "You haven't seen him fight."

"I've fought him myself," she said.

"No," Humphrey said. "You've sparred with him. Run from him. You haven't fought him. Jason is very good at killing and very bad at leaving things alive. If he'd wanted you dead, you would have been dead."

"Yeah?" she asked, sceptically. "I want to see this, then."

"That's the thing," Humphrey said. "You don't see him unless something very bad is about to happen. I'll show you a recording when we get back to the city."

"Don't show her that," Jason said. "It shows me at peak chuuni."

"Chuuni?" Sophie asked.

"We're pretty sure anything that slips through Jason's translation power is him being difficult," Humphrey advised her. "We've found it's best to let it go and not ask."

"Who's 'we?'" Jason asked.

Rufus arrived at the entrance to Dorgan's compound via magically-propelled carriage. Rather than reins, the driver steered with a bar that turned the front wheels as it was shifted left and right. Speed was controlled with a lever next to the driver's seat. Such vehicles weren't any faster than animal-drawn carriages but saved having to deal with the animals.

Rufus got down and walked up to the large gate in the outer wall. The estate had once been the main residence of a powerful Greenstone family and was suitably impressive, with grounds that were outrageously indulgent in the crowded space of Old City.

There was a well-dressed elf in a small security station built into the wall. Rufus could sense an iron-rank aura from him, the uncontrolled and muddy kind that spoke to an excess of magic cores and a deficit of training. The elf came out to open the gate and let him in.

On the other side of the gate was another elf servant, who had been awaiting his arrival and guided him inside. As they went through the grounds, Rufus could see that the grandeur of the compound had not been allowed to fade after the original occupants vacated it for the Island. The gardens were painstakingly maintained, the centuries-old brickwork still in fine condition.

The servant led Rufus to one of the wide wings of the manor and into a library. He showed Rufus to a portion of the library where an elf was standing in front of a desert landscape. Adris Dorgan had tawny skin and long, chestnut hair. He was every part the classic slender, handsome elf. Without turning his gaze from the painting he dismissed the servant with thanks.

“Do you like this painting, Mr Remore?” Dorgan asked.

Rufus considered the work.

“The artist was more concerned with evocation than accurate representation. It lends itself to the stark desert environment. It’s clear that the artist finds meaning in the desolation. A local artist?”

“Moher,” Dorgan said. “From the day I found your friend Asano standing right here, things have been going poorly for my daughter.”

“She kept her position,” Rufus said. “She wouldn’t have if certain people had their way. Luckily for her, Jason had no say in the matter.”

“His unfortunate demotion,” Dorgan said. “Association with my daughter was behind that, I imagine.”

“He did his job and he did it well,” Rufus said. “All she had to do was let him.”

“I told her much the same. Patience is a lesson often hard-learned. I have tried to guide her away from considering him part of her troubles but his position as the starting point of things going wrong plays on her mind.”

“She would be well-served by keeping her attention on what comes next,” Rufus said. “Events loom large and she has bridges to mend.”

“Is that why you’re here, Mr Remore? To mend bridges?”

“No,” Rufus said. “I’m here for those large-looming events. There is a chance someone has been smuggling some unusual materials through here or Hornis. If you help me track those down, it would reflect well on your daughter. Show the association that you are an asset to her and not an anchor. I would be willing to reflect that in my attitude on the topic, which is not without weight in certain circles.”

“Even after she turned on your friend?”

“She only tried to hurt his interests, not him,” Rufus said. “Where I come from, politics are a fact of life. Since she is going to continue as director, my preference would be that’s she’s an effective one. Her plan is still in play, if she wants it to be.”

“What plan is that?” Dorgan asked.

“To get promoted out of this town by cleaning it up. An appropriate show of contrition and using the inquiry as a launching pad will at least give her a chance. The city service agreement is two years from renegotiation. Two years is a long time in politics.”

“So it is,” Dorgan mused. “If I agree to help you, I can’t just wave my hand and produce all the city’s smugglers. I can use my connections, here and in Hornis, but there are complications. Clarissa Ventress and Cole Silva control no small portion of the less documented aspects of city trade. And there are some operators whom none of us tolerate and who are forced to work around us. There are things even the worst of us will not allow to be traded.”

“I find that hard to believe,” Rufus said.

“Mr Remore, I am more government official than criminal. The powers ruling the Island would let Old City fall into chaos so long as the money flows. I’ll acknowledge that I have walked hard roads, but I have my standards.”

“What about the other two? Ventress and Silva.”

“Ventress knows her limits, or at least she used to. If anyone is working with those I won’t tolerate, it will be Cole Silva. He’s impulsive, short-sighted and repulsive enough to traffic with those his father would have hunted down.”

“I’d pay him a visit,” Rufus said, “but that would send the ones I’m after scurrying into the shadows.”

“I will make some circumspect inquiries,” Dorgan said. “I will expect your support for my daughter, in turn.”

“Your daughter’s best move is to do her job right, in the open, where people can see her do it. I’d be happy to help that along.”

“Very well,” Dorgan said. “You have secured my help, Mr Remore. I will find you when I have something.”

Chapter 131: What the Geller Name is Worth

Rick led Clive and Belinda through the grounds. Clive and Belinda were both enraptured as Rick took them through pathways off the main thoroughfares, the visitors rapidly talking.

“See that flowering vine?” Clive asked, pointing it out to Belinda. “See the way they have it growing over the bamboo frame?”

“That’s floating ghost flower, right?” Belinda asked.

“Good eye,” Clive said.

“I know a guy who grows it.”

“A herbalist or apothecary?”

“He’s more of a recreational enthusiast.”

Clive stopped under an archway covered in the flowering vine, making sweeping gestures with his arms.

“If you could see magic you’d be able to spot the subtle impact it has on the ambient magic over the whole estate. Whoever designed this whole place was a genius. The foresight to wait for plants to grow over decades, planning out the shifts in magic as plants and trees grew. Adapting for seasonal changes, different stages of growth.”

“I can’t imagine planning that out over the whole space,” Belinda said. “This estate is bigger than an entire district in Old City.”

“We should probably keep moving,” Rick prompted. His cousin, Henry, was the team magic expert and had been similarly impressed by the grounds when they first arrived. Now Henry’s ashes had been mixed into the soil.

They spotted the dome of the mirage chamber, well before they reached the annexed buildings attached to it. Rick unlocked the control room to the mirage chamber and led them inside. Light from the glass ceiling lit up the interior, showing the wooden platforms lining the sides of the room and the waist-high stone block under the wide window that crossed the entire back wall. The interior of the dome beyond was dark.

Clive immediately began explaining things to Belinda, who had never seen anything from this branch of magic. “These wooden platforms are the interface,” he explained. “It projects your senses into an illusionary self that can interact with other generated illusions in the dome, on the other side of that window.”

He walked up to the stone block. It was heavy and grey, with a wild mess of runes and sigils carved into it.

“These are the controls,” Clive said. “It’s a lot more impressive when the chamber is active, which you’ll see later.”

Clive pointed out a small hole on the side of the block.

“That’s where you feed the crystals containing the various things to be replicated under the dome,” he explained. “The chamber’s current configuration is fine to generate some environments with some monsters in them. It’s a bit basic to handle what we brought along, though. Still, just building a mirage chamber in an area of such low magical density was incredibly impressive, especially for the time they did it. Only a fraction of what is now Old City had even been constructed. Even now, the important part – the dome – is more than capable of doing what we need. We just need to upgrade the control system so it can tell the dome to do it.”

Clive turned to look at Rick.

“Your forebears were formidable people, Rick. You have every right to be proud of what your family has accomplished.”

Rick nodded absently, glancing at the door.

“That legacy comes with a responsibility,” he said morosely. “One we pay in blood to uphold.”

Clive paused what he was doing to give Rick a long look.

“I’ve actually been here in the estate before,” Clive said. “My first monster surge was the one before last. when I was a boy. My family are eel farmers here in the delta and it was your family that took us in and sheltered us, along with countless others.”

He walked over to Rick and put a hand on his shoulder.

“This is Greenstone,” Clive said. “We know what the Geller name is worth. If you ever need anything, you ask. Everyone in the delta knows that we’ve asked plenty, and your family answered every time.”

Rick steeled his face to mask his emotions and Clive gave him a big smile, patting his shoulder before leaving him be.

“Time to gets started,” Clive said as he began pulling crates from his storage space, leaving Belinda to organise them neatly and crack them open with a pry tool.

“You don’t have a dimensional storage space,” Clive said, looking the small but effective crowbar. “Where were you keeping that?”

“Tricks of the trade,” Belinda said. “You always have to be ready.”

“You’re full of surprises, aren’t you?”

“You have no idea.”

After taking out the last box and leaving them to Belinda, Clive glanced back at Rick, then to the stone block.

“Now, Rick,” Clive said. “You see that line running around the side of the stone block, near the top?”

“Yeah,” Rick said.

“That line is where the whole top section of the block comes off as a slab, to access the inside. I'm going to unseal it and I'll need you to lift that slab off and put it out of the way. Is that something you can manage? ”

“That's a hefty bit of stone but I'll sort it out,” Rick said.

Clive used a magic wand to trace around the outside of the block, along the line he had just pointed out. Rick then hauled off the rune-covered top, revealing the block as a large stone box. The inside was covered in runes, and fitted with different components. Stone tablets, also rune-covered, were slotted vertically into the bottom, as were crystals like sculpted icicles. Unlike the control panel, magical glows traced out lines and shone from the crystals, spraying rainbow colours into the room.

“Where are all the crystals?” Rick asked. “The ones you put in the side to add new monsters.”

“Like this?” Clive asked, taking out a crystal. It was a finger-sized length of faceted crystal.

“Yeah,” Rick said. “I've seen a bunch of them put in.”

“These are highly specialised, artificial manifestations of raw magic,” Clive explained. “Sort of like very complicated spirit coins, if you like. When you feed them in the intake on the side they vanish, like when you eat a spirit coin.”

“So they don't just pile up inside, then?” Rick asked.

“No, which is good. We'll need to add quite a few once the upgrade is up and working.”

“How many is quite a few?”

“Four thousand and ninety-six,” Clive said.

“Seriously?”

“Take a look at those crates,” Clive said. “Most of them are filled with padded racks of crystals.”

Clive took a simple table from his storage space, then draped a plain, heavy cloth over it. He laid out a series of magical tools, from wedge-shaped stones to crystal orbs with silver stands to stop them from rolling away. There was a slew of magic wands, varied in length, material and shape. Many were curved or kinked; one was bent into a spiral

halfway down its length. Clive got to work, explaining what he was doing to Belinda as he went.

“I’m going to wait outside,” Rick said. “I’ll be just out the door if you need anything.”

“Thank you,” Clive said absently, not looking up from his work. Bent over into the stone box he called on Belinda to hand him various tools. Belinda peppered him with questions as she handed him each new tool, peering in at what he was doing while he explained what he was doing at each step. One after another, the magical lights went out as he worked. Once the glow was completely faded, he started carefully removing parts.

After setting them aside, he had Belinda start handing him replacement parts from the boxes they had brought. He changed the runes inside the box, his tools reworking the hard stone like the softest clay. He slotted-in new tablets and crystals, replacing almost everything inside. Finally, he chose a few of the components he had removed, and after checking them over, put them back into place. The discarded parts he had Belinda crate up for the Gellers to do with whatever they wanted.

Finally, Clive began reactivating the magic of the control system, fastidiously testing his work carefully as the rainbow light once again started shining from within.

“This all looks good,” Clive said. “I’ll rework the control slab a bit and we can do some final testing. Fetch Rick, would you please? I’ll need him to reorient the slab as I work with it.”

Clive modified both sides of the lid of the stone box, altering the mirage chamber controls. He had the lid replaced and started running tests on the mirage chamber functionality. They watched through the window as wild patterns lit up the space under the dome. There were several problems, requiring the slab to be taken off and put back on again multiple times as Clive made adjustments and tested again.

Under the dome, on the other side of the viewing window, images flickered in and out. Monsters randomly appeared with odd colours or strangely warped bodies. The most bizarre was a heidel with duck legs, both its heads having been replaced with Rick’s.

“Oh, that’s not right,” Rick said.

“You must use the chamber a lot if your head is the one that popped out,” Clive said. He methodically tackled each problem, testing and retesting as he worked through every incompatibility and adjusted every miscalibration. Finally, everything was in working order.

“Thank you,” Clive said to Rick. “You’ve made this so much easier. Or possible at all, in fact. I doubt I could even move that lid, let alone lift it.”

“My cousin would have loved this,” Rick said. “Getting into the guts of that thing.”

“The expedition?” Clive asked gently and Rick nodded.

“Will this help us find the people who we fought there?” Rick asked. “The ones who...”

Rick’s voice failed him as he remembered the blank look his friend had given him just hours ago.

“That’s the idea,” Clive said darkly. “We’re looking for something that will let us hunt them down.”

Rick nodded, eyes clear and focused.

“What else can I do to help?”

“Grab that first crate of crystals,” Clive said. “We have a lot to shove in there.”

Chapter 132:

Cleansed

“That should be the nest in there,” Humphrey said. They were on a wide embankment road, running through a stretch of wetlands. The largest portion of high ground had a sizeable stand of trees, in which they had been informed were the trap weavers.

Humphrey and Sophie looked at Jason, who still had bags under his bloodshot eyes. His gaze focused on the trees and Sophie noticed a shift in his posture. The confident, laconic, half-slouch became more upright, his feet ready to move. There was a sudden readiness that her own instincts recognised as a preparedness to fight.

“Use a recording crystal,” Humphrey said. “Give her something to watch later.

He nodded, taking out his carousel stand of recording crystals and picking one out before returning the carousel to his inventory. He tossed the crystal over his head as his magical cloak formed around him. He ran to the edge of the embankment and leapt off, cloak floating around him as he drifted lightly down to land on the surface of the water like it was solid ground. Moving forward, he disappeared into the trees.

➤ **Objective: eliminate [Trap Weavers] 1/14.**

“That was quick,” Sophie said.

“Jason has abilities and equipment well suited to fighting trap weavers,” Humphrey said. “Most of us find them troubling at best and deadly at worst. More iron-rankers in Greenstone die to trap weavers than anything else.”

Jason held his conjured dagger in a back-handed grip. Emerging from a shadow he stabbed out to his side, pinning a spider to the tree it was gripping. The spider’s body was around the size of a human torso, spewing out gore as the knife plunged through it.

-
- **Objective: eliminate [Trap Weavers] 2/14.**
 - **You have defeated [Trap Weaver].**
 - **Would you like to loot [Trap Weaver]?**
-

Jason yanked the knife free and the trap weaver splashed into the water. He walked over the surface of the water, unconcerned. Roots jutted from the water but his perception power let him easily pick them out in the darkness. A thick strand of webbing shot out and latched onto his cloak, immediately trying to pull on it. That section of cloak became

incorporeal and the strand fell limp as Jason drew a throwing dart from the bandolier on his chest and flung it toward the other end of the strand. The dart had a red cord, marking it as explosive. Chunks of trap weaver belched out of the darkness with a loud bang.

- Objective: eliminate [Trap Weavers] 3/14.
-

Jason walked over to a gobbet of flesh that had struck a tree and poked it.

- You have defeated [Trap Weaver].
 - Would you like to loot [Trap Weaver]?
-

One of the functions of Jason's hood was that he could see right through it, not obstructing his vision. He could see trap weavers all around him, crawling on trees and believing themselves hidden in the dark. They were shades of grey, like Jason's armour, which had been crafted from their leather. Their legs ended in the sharp tips that dug into bark, which made them excellent tree climbers. Those legs were also powerful and springy, allowing them to leapt between trees or onto prey.

One of the spider leapt at Jason from the left. He reached out and grabbed it out of the air, gripping it by the head. It bit into his hand as its sharp legs tried to stab his arm, but skittered off his armour.

- [Trap Weaver] has inflicted [Trap Weaver Venom] on you.
 - You have resisted [Trap Weaver Venom].
 - [Trap Weaver Venom] does not take effect.
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
-

He crushed the spider's head in his fist and dropped it into the water.

- Objective: eliminate [Trap Weavers] 4/14.
 - You have defeated [Trap Weaver].
 - Would you like to loot [Trap Weaver]?
-

From multiple directions, strands shot out at him. Some ineffectually struck his cloak, others slid off his armour without achieving purchase.

Item: [Trap Weaver Battle Robe] (iron rank, epic)

A full body armour, carefully hand-crafted from the silk and leather of trap weavers. (armour, cloth/leather).

- Effect: Increased resistance to damage. Highly effective against cutting and piercing damage, less effective against blunt damage.
- Effect: Repairs damage over time. Extensive damage may require external repair.
- Effect: Absorbs blood to prevent leaving a blood trail.
- Effect: Increases resistance to bleed and poison effects.
- Effect: Resistant to adhesive substances and abilities with adhesive effects.
- Effect: Adapts fit to the wearer, within a certain range.

Jason stood in the middle of the trap weaver encirclement. The monsters milled about, confused by their ineffectual attacks. In the shadowy copse of trees, Jason could teleport almost however he willed. He panned his gaze around, mapping out the shadows and the positions of the trap weavers. As the monsters launched a second barrage of webs, he vanished and went to work.

Humphrey and Sophie awaited Jason's return.

-
- Objective: eliminate [Trap Weavers] 5/14.
 - Objective: eliminate [Trap Weavers] 6/14.
 - Objective: eliminate [Trap Weavers] 7/14.

"He really isn't messing about," Sophie said.

"Everyone has their own way of fighting," Humphrey said. "With most monsters, I have an easier time than Jason but trap weavers are a bad match for me. I'm most effective against enemies that stand their ground in open space. Complex, shadowy environments are where trap weavers nest but that's where Jason thrives. Over time, you'll come to find what works best for you. As you pick up more abilities and get more experience, you'll refine your style."

Quest: [Notice: Trap Weavers]

- Objective complete: Eliminate [Trap Weavers] 14/14.
 - Quest complete.
-

Sophie looked up, but no bag of coins appeared.

“No rewards if we didn’t contribute,” Humphrey said. “I can see the bag dropping on you becoming annoying.”

“Getting tired of money literally falling out of the sky is a problem I’ll be happy to have.”

They spotted rainbow smoke drifting up from the top of the trees as Jason emerged. Once he reached them he dropped his cloak, revealing a large amount of blood on his head. The monster blood had vanished into smoke, making what remained come from his own injuries.

“Are you alright?” Humphrey asked.

“No worries,” Jason said. “I healed up using my abilities.”

“Did one of them bite you on the head?” Humphrey asked.

“Uh... yep. That was it.”

“What really happened?” She asked.

“Like Humphrey said,” Jason told her. “I got bitten by a monster.”

“I hope you won’t be cutting me out of too many fights,” Sophie said. “I like getting paid. Not that it feels that way, with you storing all the money.”

“Don’t worry,” Jason said. “My storage space keeps all the money together, but I’m keeping track of how much is yours.”

“And I can trust you to keep the numbers straight?” she asked.

“You still don’t trust me?” Jason asked.

“If our positions were swapped,” she said, “I would absolutely be stealing from you.” Jason chuckled.

“You’re his indentured servitor,” Humphrey pointed out. “All the work you do is for him and he is entitled to take any or all of what you earn as he likes. He doesn’t need to steal from you because he can take it all with complete legality. He doesn’t have to do any more than feed you.”

“Don’t worry,” Jason said. “I’ll keep proper track. You have to pay for your own gear, though.”

He took out a bottle of crystal wash and tipped it over his head.

“That means both equipment and consumables,” he added.

She gave him a flat look.

“What?” he asked her.

“Why would you lie and claim you were bitten on the head?” she asked.

“I’m not lying,” Jason said. “I definitely didn’t get woozy after the fight from teleporting too much while hungover and hit my head on a log.”

The procession of people who entered the ritual room was as prestigious a gathering as to be found in Greenstone. Danielle Geller, Thalia Mercer, Elspeth Arella, Emir Bahadir and the archbishop of the church of purity, Nicolas Hendren. Ernest Geller was waiting inside, playing guard to Jonah Geller. Jonah, his upper arm firmly in Ernest’s grip, glared at each person as they entered. When the Archbishop entered, Jonah’s eyes went wide and he strained to yank his arm free of Ernest’s grasp. It didn’t budge in the grip of Ernest’s bronze-rank strength.

Elspeth Arella used her aura to brutally suppress Jonah’s. Many powerful constriction abilities could only affect those whose auras had been beaten down, like the ability she used to entrap Jonah in a bubble of force. It cut off his protestations and lifted him helplessly into the air.

“Thank you, Madam Director,” the Archbishop said. “If you could move him away from the centre of the room, that would be appreciated.”

Jonah’s bubble floated away as his fists hammered at the inside. His mouth was visibly firing off invective but his voice was as confined as his body. The Archbishop took a white bag from the satchel at his side and removed the stopper from a spout in the bag’s corner. From it, he started carefully pouring out a mixture of powdered silver and gold to form a ritual circle.

“Fortunately,” he said, “divine rituals are not so vulnerable to vagaries of ambient magic as the mundane varieties.”

“I’ve never seen one performed before,” Arella said.

“They are much as ordinary rituals,” the Archbishop said. “They still draw on the power of ambient magic but are infused with the glorious might of the divine. My god’s will moves the magic and not the other way around, which is why your ability entrapping the unfortunate boy will not affect it.”

After drawing out the magical diagram, the Archbishop went around placing materials within it. Silver rank spirit coins were the bulk of the materials, while most of the others were orbs of gold or crystal, set out in small frames like silver egg-cups. When he was done, he stepped back, held out a hand and started chanting.

“God most pure, I beseech. Make in this place a sanctuary most clean, to suppress that which poisons the stem and reveal that which poisons the root. In this circle, let no rot spread nor foreign taint take action. Let all be made pure and clean.”

White and gold light started shining up from the circle.

“You may deposit the man in the circle, Madam Director,” the Archbishop said.

The bubble floated toward the circle with Jonah, trapped inside, still furiously thrashing about. His hands and head were bloodied from where had pounded them against the enclosure. As it entered the light, the bubble rapidly dissolved, like butter melting in the sun. Jonah fell out but instead of collapsing to the floor, drifted through the air to float above the centre of the magic circle. His arms and legs were pulled out to his sides, his whole body jerking in a small seizure. His eyes were wide and rapidly turning bloodshot, his jaw clenched tight.

“Jonah,” Danielle whispered, her voice wracked with misery as she looked on. Thalia Mercer placed a comforting hand on her shoulder, her own troubled gaze locked on the young man in the circle.

Jonah’s eyes rolled up in his head as his veins became visible in the form of thin, dark lines all over his body.

“There is no question,” the blank-faced Archbishop said impassively. “Something resides within the body. The circle will purge it.”

“The enemies in the astral space had something inside them,” Emir said, looking at Danielle with concern. “When endangered they were able to trigger it and kill themselves rather than be taken alive.”

“It is too late for that,” the Archbishop said. “Any power the thing inside him has cannot be activated within the circle. The concern you must have now is how deeply it has infiltrated his body. Removing it may damage or even kill him.”

“I have gold-rank potions of the highest grade ready to go,” Emir told Danielle. “So long as there is a scrap of life left in him, we won’t let it fade.”

“I will heal him the moment I am certain the taint is gone,” the Archbishop said.

Danielle didn’t acknowledge their words, her gaze unwavering from Jonah’s struggles. His body’s jerking became more violent, pushing back against the magic of the circle that held him in place. His eyes went bloody and dark, then burst outward, spraying dark fluids as something erupted from within them.

Flailing metal wires, thin as hairs, shot out in clusters from his now-empty eye sockets, waving like the tendrils of a sea creature. Danielle made to lunge forward but her arm was gripped by Emir, his gold-rank reflexes catching her before she moved. She turned on him in fury.

“You cannot help him until it is done,” the Archbishop said. “I would suggest prayer.”

Danielle shot the priest a look of venom before turning back to Jonah. She did so just in time for Jonah's cleansing to reach the final stage. Wires burst out from every part of his body, shredding muscle and skin, slicing apart bones. His flesh was shredded just as badly as his clothes as they erupted out of him.

The wires formed a complex network that seemed to have threaded itself through his entire circulatory system. A whole nest of wires had riddled Jonah's brain, slicing his skull into pieces that tumbled to the ground with the rest of his shredded corpse.

What was left was a vaguely man-shaped wire figure, with all the wires threading into and out of a nucleus in the place of the heart. Free of Jonah's body, the mass of wires staggered forward, but was rapidly corroded by exposure to the light of the circle. The wires dissolved into nothing as the nucleus fell to the floor with a hollow clatter.

In the aftermath, the light faded from the now-bloody circle. What had once been Jonah was splattered over the circle. All that remained of the wire construct was the empty nucleus. It looked like a small, hulled coconut. Danielle didn't spare it a glance as she staggered forward, toward the gory mess that was all that remained of Jonah.

"It's done," the Archbishop said, his emotionless intonation startling everyone but Danielle into looking at his calm expression. Emir and Thalia turned to Danielle, who mercifully didn't seem to have heard. She stood in front of Jonah's bloody remains, no longer recognisable as a person.

Chapter 133: It Just Takes Practise

In the late afternoon, Humphrey, Sophie and Jason were walking down a road with tall, leafy crops to either side. Finally starting to feel better, Jason let his head fall back as he drew a deep breath. He felt the warm sun of early autumn, smelled the fresh, earthy scent of the crops. He let out a contented sigh.

“This is it,” he said happily. “People talk about the money and the power but this is the adventuring life I want. Meandering through beautiful places with a good friend and a beautiful woman who may or may not be waiting for the chance to snap my neck and run for it.”

“Really?” Sophie asked flatly as Humphrey shook his head.

“I said ‘may not.’ Just look around you. Breathe in that air. Tell me you don’t want to spend your life travelling the world and visiting nice places.”

Sophie did look around, sceptically at first, then compared it to the boxed-in streets of Old City. The open spaces. The peaceful breeze playing through leafy crops.

“It does smell a lot nicer than Old City,” she acknowledged.

“Money and power are great,” Jason said. “Anything you want to get, they can give you. Anything you want to do, they can let you. But you have to want things worth having and want to do things worth doing. Money and power have to be a means, not an end, or you’ll lead a joyless life.”

Jason looked around the landscape again.

“Freedom. Travel. I want to see what this world has to show me. And someday, I want to go home. To see my own world with new eyes.”

Sophie said nothing, giving Jason an assessing look.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she said. “You’re just not what I expected.”

“And what were you expecting?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Not this.”

“What’s your world like, Jason?” Humphrey asked.

“It has places like this,” Jason said. “My family used to take trips out into the country when I was younger. My mother has a large family of mostly rural types. Good, hardworking people, you know? Not all twisty in the head like me. I grew up in a sleepy little beach town. In summer it fills up with people. Later I moved to a big city, although nothing like Greenstone. I’m not sure how to even start describing it. I wasn’t happy there, but I don’t think I was trying to be, then.”

He flashed a grin.

“But now I’m here. I have money, magic powers and I’m walking around in a place like this on a day like today. Yes, monsters try to kill me a lot and I’ve made my share of enemies, but I’m living my life, now, instead of just waiting it out.”

“Speaking of monsters,” Humphrey said. “The contract is for margolls. Dog-headed humanoids with large claws. They should be a good matchup for you, Miss Wexler, but don’t underestimate them.”

“They’re highly aggressive and fight in packs,” Jason said. “You’ll be outnumbered. The contract says six, but you should never assume the details are accurate.”

“That’s an important lesson,” Humphrey said. “A couple of months ago, Jason and I went to retrieve the body of an adventurer killed because the contract details were wrong.”

“Very wrong,” Jason said. “We were lucky someone else didn’t end up coming for our bodies.”

“Margolls are another common local monster,” Humphrey said. “When they turn up, everyone evacuates and word is sent to the city to post a contract. There are several farms here, so they’ve probably settled in until they eat their way through the herds. Once Stash spots them, we’ll have a location.”

“Stash?” Sophie asked. “That’s the bird familiar you’ve had scouting around?”

“He’s been spending a lot of time as a bird, lately,” Humphrey said. “I’m not sure how much he understands about what happened during the expedition, but he knows there was a lot of danger. I think he’s trying to be more useful.”

“Spending time as a bird?” Sophie asked.

Humphrey was about to answer when a large bird swooped down out of the sky towards Humphrey, transforming into a puppy and dropping into his arms. Humphrey scratched him behind the ears.

“He’s a shape-changer,” Humphrey said. “You found them, little guy?”

Stash yipped happily. By turning his head and letting out little barks, Stash led them in the right direction. Eventually, they spotted the margolls in a field full of dead animals. The three crouched in the long grass, behind a simple, wooden rail fence that separated the field from the road. They looked through the fence at the margolls on the far side of the field.

“Looks like the margolls came from this side,” Humphrey said. “The herd fled to the far end of the field and were pinned against the fence and slaughtered.”

The slain herd were creatures that Jason had always thought of as cow lizards. The margolls had killed them all and were feasting on the carcasses.

“Those poor animals,” Humphrey said. “I know they were a meat herd, but they didn’t need to die in fear like that. And it’s wasteful, too. The margolls can’t consume all that meat, but they only eat their fresh kills. They’ll take their fill, sleep it off and go hunting for more things to slaughter.”

“No, they won’t,” Jason said. “They aren’t leaving this field. I count nine.”

“Me too,” Sophie said.

“Wexler, Humphrey will be ready to step in quickly if anything goes wrong. You need to understand, though, that when things go wrong, they go wrong fast and hard. I’m not saying don’t take risks, because pushing yourself is the point. Just make sure they’re calculated risks.”

Sophie took a steeling breath, then lightly vaulted the wooden fence and started walking across the field. Caught up in gorging on the dead animals, the margolls didn’t notice her until a breeze picked up and carried her scent to them. As it did, they looked up from their kills and howled. Leaping to their feet, they started charging across the field at her. She stopped walking, watching them approach.

Dog-headed monsters with sickle claws scrambled madly in her direction, some on two limbs, others on four. She started moving again, picking up pace to run at them as they charged in her direction, letting out discordant, bloodthirsty howls. They were quick, but she sailed over the grass like a wind spirit.

Well-short of reaching them, she leapt into the air. She span through one horizontal kick and then into a second with the other leg, both without touching the ground. Then she stepped on the air to keep her momentum going and kicked once more before finally landing. She had made two full turns in the air and landed at a run.

Each sweeping kick had unleashed a wide blade of wind that made a shimmering path toward the margolls. The trio of wide blades were as large and slow as she could make them, but the ravaging monsters disregarded their approach entirely.

The change came as the first blade savaged the foremost monsters, blood spraying as they ran right into the blade. It was not enough to kill them but to fell to the ground, howling distress. The one who stayed standing took the full brunt of the second blade, having its body cut into ragged halves, while more of the creatures were injured behind it. The third blade came on the heels of the second, finished wounded margolls and injuring more.

The pack were left angry, hurt and confused. The injured one howls their pain, the others their rage. Their charge had been halted as they milled in disarray.

Back on the road, Jason and Humphrey looked on using a far-sight crystal to magnify their view.

“Did you know she could do that?” Humphrey asked.

“I did not,” Jason replied. “Should we move closer?”

“I think so,” Humphrey said as wings appeared on his back and he flew over the fence. Jason vaulted it, not with the grace Sophie had done, but Gary’s mobility training made it a negligible task.

“How long would it take you to get over there?” Jason asked.

“A few seconds,” Humphrey said. “Five maybe.”

“You can cross the distance that quick?”

“If I fly forward, then launch into my flying leap attack, yes.”

“Not bad.”

The margolls were in turmoil and Sophie was not going to waste it, still running across the grass as if she were flying. She crashed into one of the injured ones, knocking it into the rest and adding to the chaos her wind blades had sown. The margolls fought with wild ferocity, while her movements were clean and efficient. Blocks made openings for attack and dodges set up combination strikes. Fists and feet, elbows and knees; no movement was wasted or opportunity missed as she pounded the margolls with power and precision.

Despite her speed and skill, the frenetic creatures were not on the back foot for long, using their numbers to box in their singular enemy. Sickle claws aimed to reap her life away, but were met with fists and forearms. Every attack she was able to meet, her powers shielded her from suffering so much as a scratch.

As they moved to surround her, she couldn’t intercept every attack. A raking slash from the side cut into her leg and from the rear a lacerating swipe scored her upper arm. She ignored the pain and kept fighting, having drawn them in as she wanted.

Having boxed her in, the monsters pushed in hard, only to find she had been replaced with an afterimage. As their claws lashed ineffectually through it, she reappearing a small distance away. As the clustered margolls milled in confusion, Sophie was launching another triple wind blade.

Having moved so close together in their attempt of overwhelm her, they had made themselves vulnerable to the sweeping blades of if air. The razor wind erupted on impact after slicing through skin and muscle, the blade hideously effective against the margolls who had no more defences than their short, bristly fur. After three blades only one was standing, badly injured. Sophie finished it off before making sure the ones on the ground were all dead.

Surrounded by dead enemies, Sophie stood tall and drew in heavy, exhausted breaths. Jason and Humphrey arrived at the scene as a bag of coins fell on her head.

“Ow.”

“When did you come up with that spinning jump thing?” Jason asked her.

“You left for two weeks,” she said, picking the bag. “Did you think I spent the whole time meditating?”

“Fair enough,” he said, taking the bag and putting it in his inventory. “Did Rufus help with that?”

“I think he felt bad for me.”

“Sorry,” Jason said. “I kind of left you in limbo, there.”

Jason took out a notebook scribbled in it with a pencil.

“What’s that?” Sophie asked.

“It’s how I’m keeping track of your money,” he said, putting them away again.

“Oh,” she said. “Thank you.”

“You have some real unarmed combat skills,” Humphrey said. “I have a relative, Phoebe. She’s an unarmed specialist, too, and she’s been looking for someone to practice with for a while. I think you could help each other.”

“I’d like that,” Sophie said, jerking a thumb at Jason. “She has to be more reliable than this guy.”

“Oh, come on,” Jason said.

“You did just leave without telling anyone,” Humphrey pointed out.

“Yeah, well... alright. That’s fair.”

“If you’re interested, then sooner might be better than later,” Humphrey said. “It would be dark long before we reached the city; my family estate is closer, here in the delta. I can introduce you to Phoebe and we can go back to the city in the morning.”

“Sounds good to me,” Jason said. “What do you say, Wexler? Want to be put up in the most prestigious estate in Greenstone? I’ll just loot these monsters and we can get going.”

“You realise you’re saying that to someone staying in Emir Bahadir’s cloud palace,” Humphrey said.

“I am going to miss having a cloud bed,” Jason said. “It was the worst part of leaving the city for so long.”

“I can’t offer those,” Humphrey said, “but we do have hammocks. They’re really good for the hot nights.”

“Never have sex in a hammock,” Jason advised. “It seems like it would be awesome, but it’s actually quite troublesome.”

“It just takes practise,” Humphrey said offhandedly, earning a wide-eyed look from Jason.

“What?” Humphrey asked.

“What are we looking at?” Rick asked.

In the mirage chamber control room, Rick, Belinda and Clive were looking through the window. Under the dome, a large illusionary orb and a small illusionary orb were pressing into one another.

“The small orb is a simulated astral space,” Clive said. “The big orb is a simulated world it’s attached to. This isn’t what they would actually look like; I simulated their magical aspects, rather than the physical ones.”

“Why?” Rick asked.

“A lot of equipment was brought back from the astral space,” Clive explained. “I managed to replicate what they were doing on a small scale, but I couldn’t figure out what it did. Using it in our world, instead of an astral space, meant all the power it output just got absorbed. Our world is too big. Of course, going back into the astral space and setting it up again was not an option. Here, we’ve created a simulation of an astral space, a world to anchor it and the equipment the expedition bought operating inside it.”

“So, instead of a monster, you created a whole world?” Rick asked.

“Not exactly,” Clive said. “I’ve examined the equipment quite thoroughly and isolated what it should interact with and simulated that. Simulating a whole world is beyond any mirage chamber I’ve ever heard of.”

“So, what are the results?” Rick asked.

“We’ll have to wait. I’ve accelerated the simulation as much as possible, and so long as I haven’t missed anything major, it will eventually show us exactly what the expedition interrupted.”

They watched eagerly for the first hour, attention waning in the second. Rick went and brought them all lunch while Clive and Belinda turned to books from Clive’s personal stash. After looking through Clive’s collection, Rick went to retrieve a book with less theory and more tales of dashing heroics.

It was evening before something changed on the inside of the chamber. They all went to the window, watching the two orbs.

“We already know what they were doing would have catastrophic results,” Clive said. “The major question is whether that was the objective or a side-effect.”

The two orbs had been pushing into each other for the entire run of the simulation, but as they watched, the smaller orb pulled away. The surface of the large orb, where the small orb had contacted it, was wrinkled and marred, where the rest was smooth.

“Is that it?” Rick asked.

“No,” Clive said. “The astral space, the small orb, shouldn’t be able to maintain its integrity without being attached to its world. Just pulling apart should have caused it to break down.”

“Is someone trying to make a small, independent world?” Belinda asked.

“If they are, it won’t work,” Clive said. “It can’t last long, like that.”

As if to prove his point, the smaller orb started to distort, breaking apart into chunks and then vanishing entirely.

“There we have it,” Clive said. “Their objective was to separate the astral space from our world while maintaining its structure for at least some amount of time.”

“How much time?” Belinda asked.

“Weeks. Months, at the outside. I’ll need to examine the simulation recording to get more details, but the basics are clear.”

“Why would they do that?” Rick asked.

“No idea,” Clive said.

“Who benefits?” Belinda asked. “And how?”

“From a huge chunk of dislodged physical reality, floating through the deep astral?” Clive asked. “No one. Even gods couldn’t do anything with it; once it leaves their world, it’s out of their ability to affect. All that leaves is...”

Clive’s eyes went wide as he let a low sound of horror out of his mouth.

“No...”

He paced back and forth, clutching at his hair with his hands.

“This is bigger than us,” he said. “Astral spaces. Ours wasn’t the only one affected. Oh, this is bad.”

“What’s bad?” Belinda asked. She and Rick were looking at Clive in frustration.

“I’ve figured it out,” he said.

“We got that much,” Belinda said. “What did you figure out?”

“We need to tell someone,” Clive said. “A diamond ranker. Lots of diamond rankers.”

He bolted for the door, Belinda and Rick following, only to meet Clive rushing back in. He gave Rick a wild-eyed look.

“I don’t know how to get back,” Clive said.

Chapter 134: World Building

The sky was nearing full dark but the pathways of the Geller estate were lit up by magical lights, albeit ones selected and placed more for aesthetics than practicality. Rather than simple illumination, the discretely placed lights washed the gardens in shifting colours.

Clive had no time to stop and appreciate it as he led Rick and Belinda through the gardens in a rush, striding with his long legs. Belinda did have time, as Clive's enthusiasm outpaced his ability to navigate, requiring Rick to correct him as he headed down one wrong path after another. This allowed Belinda to keep up in spite of her more measured pace.

"I like these lights," Belinda said.

"Good, aren't they?" Rick asked. "No, Clive, the left.

Clive grumbled as he came back up one path to head down another.

"Explain this again," Belinda said to Clive as he came past. "There's some kind of super god?"

"Yes," Clive said distractedly. "Except no. But yes. But no."

"That clears everything up," Rick said as Clive strode off again.

Compared to Clive, Humphrey, Sophie and Jason made their way through estate grounds at a relaxed saunter. They took the time to appreciate the colourfully lit paths.

"I looted some material from those trap weavers," Jason said. "My combat robes are made from the same stuff. I know a guy who can probably use it to make you something similar, Wexler."

"I thought you said I'd have to pay for my own gear," Sophie said.

"We're in a group," Jason said. "We split the loot as a group. You'll still have to pay for labour costs yourself."

"Thanks," she said with a frown. "Sorry, that sounded insincere. Gratitude isn't a feeling I'm used to."

Jason laughed.

"No worries. I know what it feels like to go from random nobody to adventurer with magic powers and such, hobnobbing with the wealthy and powerful. Which will be us, soon enough. It's a bit disorienting, isn't it? Feels hard to get your feet under you. Normal keeps

slipping away from you like a bar of wet soap. You're constantly trying to figure out what normal is, now."

"Yeah," she said. "That's exactly what it feels like."

Danielle, Emir, Thalia, Arella and the Archbishop were moving through the estate grounds from the ritual building toward the main house. Fresh from witnessing the gruesome demise of Jonah Geller, Danielle was still reeling, lingering at the back of the group. Ernest Geller, the only non-silver amongst them, had taken over the duty of guiding them through the grounds.

"I am not subjecting my son to that process," Thalia Mercer said adamantly as they moved along the path.

"That will not be necessary," said Herston, the Archbishop of purity. "Now that we know what we are dealing with, our methods can be more precise."

"We know what we're dealing with?" Arella asked.

"The boy was implanted with a star seed. My church has seen such things in the past and has long-developed the means to extract them. There will be damage, depending on how long the seed has been inside them, but no irrevocable harm."

"What good does that do Jonah?" Danielle spat. It was the first time she had spoken since Emir led her away from Jonah's ruined body.

"What is this star seed, exactly?" Emir asked.

"They are the creations of entities from beyond your physical reality, only existing in the deep astral," the Archbishop said. "They are known by various names, but most commonly as the great astral beings. There are heretics in our world who offer them improper veneration, perversely akin to how the pious worship the gods. The astral beings can bestow blessings, like gods, but cannot bestow essence and awakening stones. Instead, they can send their followers star seeds."

"Is that what the people we tried to capture were using to kill themselves?" Emir asked."

"Most likely," the Archbishop said. "The seed must first be implanted into the body. Once it has germinated, the body undergoes a transformation, which may be minor or major."

"We've seen that," Thalia said. "The people who attacked the expedition were bizarre combinations of flesh and steel."

“Once the transformation is complete, the remnant power of the star seed is available for the heretic to use. Exploding that power to kill themselves should be well within their capabilities.”

“And they put those things in our children,” Thalia growled. “I’m going to kill them all.”

“And so you should,” the Archbishop said. “The seeds turn the implanted people into vessels for the astral beings; puppets without will. Only the most dedicated volunteer for such a process. At first the influence is subtle. Their memories and personalities remaining intact, the only control being a drive to protect the seeds within them from discovery. Slowly, without their even realising it is happening, the hosts become puppets. Their personalities are supplanted, shifting towards the will of the astral being who crafted the seeds.”

“How long does that take?” Thalia asked.

“I don’t know,” the Archbishop said. “I only know this much because I have studied all manner and means of impurity. I have never encountered a star seed in person. I will consult my church’s records after returning to the city.”

“Why weren’t these seeds found before now?” Thalia asked. “All five were examined in the camp, then back in the city, by silver-rank healers. Why didn’t they find these things inside them?”

“Star seeds are not some affliction to be easily purged by an essence ability,” the Archbishop explained. “These are transcendent-rank objects, brought into being by entities so vast and alien that we cannot comprehend the fullness of them. They require more than some simple ritual or essence ability to discover, let alone, purge. We should give thanks to our gods for shielding us from such things.”

“Your god didn’t help Jonah,” Danielle said. “Your god’s ritual tore him apart.”

“Perhaps if your family were more dedicated in their piety, he would have been protected.”

The whole group stopped as Emir used a mirage step to get between Danielle and the Archbishop, holding a hand out to forestall her rage. After checking she wasn’t going to try and rush past him, Emir turned a fierce glare on the priest.

“You had best watch yourself, Archbishop,” Emir warned. “Keep talking like that and I won’t get in her way again.”

The Archbishop snorted derision but didn’t say anything else, resuming their passage through the gardens. After a heavy pause, the others followed.

“The next step must be to retrieve the other four,” Arella said as they neared the main house. “You are certain you can extract these seeds without harming the people they are implanted in?”

“Without harming, no; without killing, yes. I am certain my church has the means, although there are two requirements. First, we must get hold of the people that harbour them before the seeds have taken too deep a root. Once the seeds have overtaken the body, they impinge upon the soul, after which it is too late. The second requirement is that we need to know which astral entity created the seeds. Each such entity creates a different seed and must be adjusted for, accordingly.”

“That gives us two priorities, then,” Arella said. “First, retrieve the remaining four affected, which should be the easy part. The Adventure Society has people watching them, waiting on the results of this ritual. Now we are certain they’ve been compromised, we can have them brought in immediately. They will be apprehended and Mr Bahadir’s portal user can bring them back to Greenstone.”

“What about finding out which great astral being we’re dealing with?” Danielle asked. “I want to know who is doing this to us.”

“I can answer that!” a voice called out.

They were nearing the main house, where the pathways leading all through estate converged into an open space. Coming from another path was an agitated Clive, with Rick and Belinda in tow.

Rick cast an anxious gaze over the group. He saw that Jonah was not with them, while Ernest, who he had last seen guarding Jonah, was. Then he spotted Danielle, red-eyed and distraught, which startled him. He had never seen her in any state but complete self-control. Rick’s whole body slumped as he realised what that meant for Jonah’s fate.

“What are you talking about?” Arella asked Clive as he hurried over to them.

“You were talking about an astral entity, right?” Clive asked. “I know which one it is, and what it’s after.”

The two groups converged as Rick and Belinda followed, then grew again as Humphrey, Jason and Sophie appeared. Belinda and Sophie shared a surprised look at each other’s presence, while Humphrey was startled by his mother’s plain distress, rushing to her side. His large figure towered over her as he embraced her in a deep hug.

“I think, perhaps,” Arella said, “We should take any further discussion inside.”

She turned to Ernest.

“You were part of the group that found the five, yes?” she asked.

“I was,” Ernest said.

"I assume there is a speaking chamber here on the estate. The personal autonomy of the other four is no longer valid. Tell the rest of your group to take the remaining four into custody immediately and bring them in, under the full authority of the Adventure Society."

"Yes, Ma'am," Ernest said before moving off at a half-run.

"We have a conference room in the house," Danielle said, giving Humphrey's worried arms a reassuring pat as she moved out of them. "We can hear out Mr Standish there. Humphrey, please see to the rest of our guests."

Danielle led the group inside the house, leaving Humphrey with Jason, Belinda, Sophie and Rick.

"What are you doing here, Lindy?" Sophie asked.

"Complicated magic with the fate of the world at stake," Belinda said causally. "You?"

"It's getting late and I was offered a hammock."

"My thing is more exciting," Belinda said.

"Sounds like it. Who were all those people?"

"Just a bunch of rich folk," Belinda said. "So, a hammock? Do you remember that guy Barry? He always used to sleep in a hammock."

"Was he the one that got killed when an anvil fell on him?"

"That's the one. Building a smithy on the third floor was a terrible idea."

"I recall a lot of his ideas being bad."

"No kidding. He wanted to, you know, in his hammock one time. I thought it would be fun but it was just awkward."

"I'm told it takes practice," Sophie said.

"Of course you were told that," Belinda said. "Anyone who looks at you, their first thought is 'how to get that girl to practise sex with me a lot?' That's how we got into this whole mess, remember?"

"That's not how I'd describe it."

As the two women talked, Humphrey and Jason approached Rick, staring blankly into the air.

"Rick?" Humphrey asked.

"I don't think Jonah made it," Rick said absently, eyes unfocused.

"He's dead?" Humphrey asked.

"They didn't say, but you saw your mother."

Humphrey bowed his head, running his hands through it. "Gods damn it. I didn't know things were that bad."

"Ernest brought him in by portal," Rick said. "They had me waiting to go get all the..."

He waved his arm at the house where all the important people had gone, leaving them behind.

"Where was that?" Humphrey asked.

"The ritual room. The big, isolated one."

"Well, let's go take a look," Humphrey said. "See if we can't get some answers."

Humphrey pointed out a building annexed from the main house.

"That's one of the visitor residences," he said. "Jason, you, Miss Wexler and her friend can go straight in."

Jason nodded, patting Rick on the shoulder.

"Let me know about Jonah, yeah?"

"Of course."

Clive was pacing at the end of a conference room, while the group of Greenstone's most important people sat around the conference table.

"How did you know one of the great astral beings was involved?" Clive asked.

"You are here to answer our questions," the Archbishop said. "Not the other way around."

"Right, yes. Um, so, great astral beings. We don't know all that much about most of them, because only a handful seem to take any interest in physical realities. The World-Phoenix, the All-Devouring Eye, the Reaper, the Celestial Book. More than any of those, however, one called the Builder takes specific interest in physical realities."

"You seem well versed in the knowledge of these beings," the Archbishop said.

"Yes," Clive said. "I happen to venerate the Celestial Book myself. It's fairly common for those of us heavily involved in magical theory."

"You admit to being a heretic?" the Archbishop asked, half-standing. The rage on his face was a stark contrast to the emotionless way he had observed Jonah's horrific death.

Clive glared back at the Archbishop.

"I suppose I could be considered a heretic," Clive said. "The same way that the exploitation of rigid dogma to act out personal prejudice could be considered faith."

The Archbishop's silver-rank aura exploded out towards Clive but was immediately crushed by Emir's gold rank aura.

"This is not the time, Archbishop. We are here to listen, not judge."

"The gods are always judging us. Forgoing righteousness for expediency is an easy path to sin."

“And not shutting up is the path to being kicked out,” Danielle said. “This is my home and you are here by my forbearance.”

The Archbishop scowled but settled silently back into his seat.

“Emotions are running high, and with good reason,” Emir said. “That doesn’t change the fact that tempering ourselves will accomplish more than indulging ourselves will.”

Emir panned his gaze around the room, asserting his authority with a delicate but unmistakable employment of his aura.

“Please, continue, Mr Standish,” he said.

“Thank you,” Clive said. “As I was saying, there is one astral entity who takes more interest than the others in physical realities, which is to say, worlds like ours. Most of the others operate similarly to gods in that what they want is the promotion of various ideals. The World-Phoenix fosters dimensional integrity; the Celestial Book promotes the understanding of magic’s underlying nature. The Reaper advocates the finality of death. The Builder is not like these others. It has no interest in disseminating principals and is instead obsessed with physical reality while, by its very nature, being unable to co-exist with it. This dichotomy of its core drive and its intrinsic properties has led to an undertaking on such ambition it staggers belief.”

“What kind of undertaking?” Emir asked.

“It is building a world of its own,” Clive said. “Creating a new physical reality in the deep astral. The way it does this is to take raw materials that are neither fully of the astral or of physical reality.”

“You’re talking about astral spaces,” Arella said.

“Exactly,” Clive said. “Astral spaces form attached to worlds, without which they immediately break down. Without a world to anchor them, they cannot exist. But if an astral space is given the ability to sustain itself, even for just a brief period, the Builder can take it and anchor it to the world the Builder is creating from stolen parts.”

“You’re saying that those people we fought were trying to steal the astral space for this Builder?” Arella asked. “A dimensional pirate, plundering chunks of reality from which to build its own?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. An astral being cannot interact with physical reality directly, so it needs to recruit others to act for it. The Builder recruits people to carve off the astral spaces connected to their world, then it steps in and claims them. I’ve read about the Builder doing this, but now I’ve seen the means by which it does so.”

“What are the ramifications of losing astral spaces?” Emir asked.

“It varies, since different astral spaces are connected to worlds in different ways. The process they were using in our local astral space was designed to keep the astral space intact, at the cost of catastrophic destruction to the physical reality. I can confidently assert that the results would be similar in other instances.”

“We have reports of astral spaces suffering incursions like ours all over the world,” Arella said.

“That’s right,” Clive said. “Astral spaces, all over the world. We’re talking about cataclysmic destruction the world over. Death and destruction on a civilisation-ending scale. The only comfort I can take is that there are smarter people than me looking into all this and stronger people than us doing something about it. This is a threat that extends beyond the reaches of our world. We need diamond rankers to act, and act fast.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Mr Standish,” Emir said. “The information you’re giving us is not information we’ve been getting from elsewhere. Either they don’t know, or they are hiding the potential risks to avoid panic.”

“At the risk of agreeing with the Archbishop,” Thalia Mercer said, “how confident are you in this information, Standish?”

“Very,” Clive said. “My knowledge of the great astral beings comes from one of the Magic Society’s previous directors. The great astral beings were his field of study and he had a collection of journals from diamond-rank adventurers who had travelled between worlds. He left those to me after his death and I know them well.”

“And you’re sure this Builder’s people are the ones doing these things to our astral spaces?” Thalia asked.

“Yes. The Builder, as I mentioned, has no driving ideology. He forms groups, cults, driven not by ideology, but through gifts of power. The fact that we are seeing any of this suggests they have been operating here for years. Maybe decades.”

“But you are certain this Builder is behind them?” Arella asked.

“I have managed to successfully simulate what they were doing in the Geller’s mirage chamber. The goal of their efforts was to reinforce the astral space and sever it from our world. Nothing short of a great astral being has the power to make anything of such an act, and of them, only the Builder has any interest in it.”

“I think our next move should be to confirm this information as best we can,” Arella said. “If combine we what we’ve seen today, Mr Standish’s findings and the experiences of the expedition together, we may well have at least an acceptable level of confirmation to disseminate to the Adventure Society at large.”

“Mr Standish, I’d like a look at those journals, if you don’t mind,” Emir requested.

"I've made copies of the originals," Clive said. "I'll deliver them to your cloud palace."

"I shall look into the records of our rituals for removing star seeds," the Archbishop said. "There may be details in the rituals for removing this Builder's seeds that help confirm he is the one."

"Thank you," Emir said.

"I'll turn the more scholarly members of my family loose on the temple of knowledge's library," Danielle said. "The goddess always welcomes seekers of truth."

"I'll do likewise," Thalia said.

"I will make sure that everything we learn is spread to the Adventure Society as a whole and see if they have anything in return," Arella said. "We aren't the only ones dealing on this problem, but one group of many working to contribute."

"Good," Emir said, standing up. "We all have our tasks; we should get to them. Well done, Mr Standish."

"The hour is getting late," Danielle said, also getting up. "You are all welcome to stay the night. We have ample room."

Thalia and Emir accepted the offer, with the Archbishop and Elspeth Arella declining; everyone recognised that neither the priest nor the Adventure Society director were truly welcome in Danielle Geller's home. They went off to their transport while Danielle led Thalia, Emir and Clive toward the guest wing.

"Mr Standish," Emir said as they left the conference room. "Have you ever considered becoming a professional treasure hunter?"

Chapter 135: Fabulous Prizes

The day's first light found Jason meditating on a porch. It was attached to just one of the Geller family guest houses, each larger than the four-bedroom home Jason grew up in. Like most of the Geller estate building, it was nestled amongst the lush greenery of the gardens.

-
- Ability [Cloak of Night] (Dark) has reached Iron 6 (100%).
 - Ability [Cloak of Night] (Dark) has reached Iron 7 (00%).
-

Jason opened his eyes. His recent two-week storm of monster hunting had not been as effective at raising his abilities as he hoped. His lower-level abilities improved well enough, but his highest-rank ones were starting to plateau. Once he was back in the city, he would seek out Rufus for advice.

Jason Asano

- Race: Outworlder.
- Current rank: iron
- Progression to bronze rank: 25% (2/4 essences complete)

Attributes

- [Power] (Blood): [Iron 5].
- [Speed] (Dark): [Iron 0].
- [Spirit] (Doom): [Iron 0].
- [Recovery] (Sin): [Iron 5].

Racial Abilities (Outworlder)

- [Party Interface].
- [Quest System].
- [Inventory].
- [Map].
- [Astral Affinity].
- [Mysterious Stranger].

Essences (4/4)

Dark [Speed] (3/5)

- [Midnight Eyes] (special ability): [Iron 8] 19%.
- [Cloak of Night] (special ability): [Iron 7] 00%.
- [Path of Shadows] (special ability): [Iron 7] 04%.

Blood [Power] (5/5)

- [Blood Harvest] (spell): [Iron 6] 98%.
- [Leech Bite] (special attack): [Iron 6] 14%.
- [Feast of Blood] (spell): [Iron 5] 92%.
- [Sanguine Horror] (familiar): [Iron 6] 89%.
- [Haemorrhage] (spell): [Iron 5] 06%.

Sin [Recovery] (5/5)

- [Punish] (special attack): [Iron7] 23%.
- [Feast of Absolution] (spell): [Iron 6] 23%.
- [Sin Eater] (special ability): [Iron 6] 69%.
- [Hegemony] (aura): [Iron 7] 69%.
- [Castigate] (spell): [Iron 5] 23%.

Doom [Spirit] (4/5)

- [Inexorable Doom] (spell): [Iron 7] 16%.
- [Punition] (spell): [Iron 6] 54%.
- [Blade of Doom] (spell): [Iron 4] 39%.
- [Verdict] (spell): [Iron 3] 94%.

Jason could feel the changes in his attributes. His power attribute made him stronger than he had been before. He could better handle being knocked around by monsters, as well. It was nothing like the superhuman strength of Gary or even Rufus, but compared to his previous self it was definitely noticeable. Additionally, his increased recovery attribute had greatly increased his stamina, and his mana recovery was quicker than previous.

The changes were reflected in his physical appearance, as well. His meagre physique wasn't bulking out, but flaccid muscle was gradually becoming sleek and lean. He stood up and stretched.

"Feeling sexy."

"What was that?" Emir asked, approaching along a garden path.

"I said I'm feeling sexy," Jason said. "I'm not ashamed to admit it. You're up and about, early."

"Lots to do," Emir said. "I wanted to talk to you before I headed back for the city."

Jason returned his meditation mat to his inventory and gestured Emir towards the outdoor furniture on the porch.

"Iced tea?" Jason offered.

"That would be nice," Emir said. The delta heat was already rising. Jason took a pair of tall glasses and a pitcher from his inventory. He filled a glass with ruby red tea, chilled by the chunks of ice in the pitcher. Emir took an appreciative sip.

"What did you put in this?" he asked.

“Gem berries,” Jason said. “They’re in season.”

Emir took another sip before turning to his main topic.

“The reason I’ve come by is that I wanted to talk to you. I anticipated having this conversation earlier but the delay is for the best, given recent revelations. How much are you aware of what’s going on?”

“You mean the monster from beyond reality who likes playing with blocks? Clive told us about it last night.”

“Did you hear about the star seeds?”

“Yeah. Between what Ernest saw and Clive knows, I think I have it all.”

“What do you think about what our enemies are doing, seeding those people?”

Jason rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“I think their plan is going about as well as they could ask, given it was almost certainly hatched in a very short time.”

“Care to expand on that?” Emir asked.

Jason snorted a laugh

“You know, I had teachers like you,” he said. “The ones that make you keep talking until they’re sure you’re right, or sure you’re wrong.”

Emir chuckled. “I think I’m starting to understand some of Rufus’ complaints about you. Why don’t you go ahead and indulge me?”

“Fine,” Jason said. “Think about it from the bad guys’ perspective. They’ve been working for months in this astral space, only for a small army of adventurers to arrive. They know the jig is up, so they knock together a hasty plan. Use their construct army to send the invading adventurers into disarray, giving the villains of the piece time to extricate their people. While they’re at it, they snag some iron-rankers in the chaos, shove in some star seeds and leave them in suspiciously easy to find locations. They scarper, leaving us with a bunch of suspiciously suspicious people to be suspicious of. Which we are. Secretive meetings between powerful people; the local powers scrambling to figure out what’s been done to them without setting off a political volcano. In the meantime, their actual agents are running around without us wondering if they even exist.”

“You think the five were a distraction?”

“It’s the only thing they’re good for. Attempting to use them as agents for some agenda would be pointless because they’ve been watched from the moment we got them back, which was obviously going to happen. My guess would be that they have a secondary objective. Maybe another astral space, somewhere.”

“How would you go about figuring out if they’re just a distraction?”

“That’s easy; the key is the other four. They’re only iron rank, so if they mysteriously slip the higher-rank people who try and bring them in, forcing us to focus even more time and resources on them, then they’re definitely a distraction. Whoever is responsible for that might have even let Jonah get taken so they would find what’s inside him. That way, we have to make retrieving the others the priority, even if we figure out they’re a distraction. We can’t just leave a bunch of wealthy scions full of interdimensional mind-control bombs.”

Emir gave Jason an assessing look as he refilled his glass.

“So, teach, was I right or wrong?”

“We send word to bring the four in last night,” Emir said. “They all escaped the people keeping an eye on them. The Hornis branch of the Adventure Society is conducting a large-scale search.”

“There you go,” Jason said. “You need to get people looking for the real agents, maybe find out if there’s another astral space nearby. But you already have people on that, don’t you.”

“There is another astral space,” Emir said. “Smaller than the desert astral space, and different in several key ways. It’s been hidden for longer than Greenstone has been here, but it’s still here.”

“Sounds like you have things well in hand,” Jason said.

“There are some complications,” Emir said. “I’ve already mentioned to you the event I came to Greenstone to conduct.”

“Oh,” Jason said. “This place you want explored is an astral space?”

“Yes, but one much harder to enter than the desert astral space. It requires certain conditions to open that I have spent most of the last two years looking to fulfil, all while looking for the entrance.”

“Which is here,” Jason said.

“Not right here, but close enough. I had my people confirm it shortly after I arrived. The major complication, however, is that even once opened, only iron-rankers may enter. We’ve tried considerable measures to get around it, none of which were found to be viable.”

“So you need a bunch of iron rankers to explore it for you,” Jason said.

“Precisely. There is something my client wants inside it and considerable rewards await whoever brings it to me.”

“Two years of searching; I imagine the rewards that await you are even more considerable.”

“Indeed they are,” Emir said. “It’s what allows me to be so generous.”

“How generous is that?”

“I’m not going to tell you the main prize, but the secondary prize is five legendary awakening stones for whichever team brings me the item. That should give you some indication.”

“Five legendary stones is the secondary prize? That’s generous, alright.”

“Unfortunately, your chances of winning the prize have rather dropped,” Emir said.

“Oh?”

“You know I pushed back the event, in the wake of the expedition.”

“You’re talking about the iron rankers you’re shipping in from outside the city? It’s going to be harder because I won’t just be up against Greenstone’s trashy iron-rankers.”

“Essentially, yes.”

“It doesn’t really change anything. The smart money was always on Beth Cavendish and her team, or maybe one some of the Geller groups. Rick’s team has taken some hits, but they have, what? Five more teams?”

“Humphrey is a Geller. Are you going to formalise a team?”

“We’ve talked about it.”

“You should do more than talk,” Emir said. “Your abilities should be starting to slow down their advancement by now, yes.”

“Actually, yes,” Jason said. “What’s that got to do with a team?”

“You need to start focusing on the contracts for which you are poorly-suited. You need to push yourself harder.”

“I get it,” Jason said. “Go for the hard stuff, but have a team to save you when it goes wrong.”

“Exactly.”

“Thanks for the advice.”

Emir finished his glass of iced tea.

“Another?” Jason offered.

“Please.”

Emir let out a sigh as Jason poured.

“These revelations about astral spaces are having an unpleasant impact on my plans,” he said.

“Do they want you to leave the astral space sealed, or use it as bait?” Jason asked.

“Bait. They want an examination by the purity church to be a condition of participation, but only tell people that once they’re assembled onsite. I’m not sure if the

church can muster an appropriate test, but we may uncover people when they refuse to be subjected to it.”

“I’m not sure I’m willing to be subjected to it,” Jason said. “What kind of examination are we talking about?”

“I don’t know. The impression I get is that these seeds are hard to discover without invasive methods.”

“Well if you think I’m letting a priest shove a probe up in me, you’re sorely mistaken, which I imagine will be the majority opinion. Not to mention that if I were these people, the iron-rankers I’d send would be evil-implant free.”

“Whatever we decide to do,” Emir said, “I’ll be asking certain participants I trust to keep an eye out in the astral space. We have no idea who could be a Builder cultist.”

Jason frowned.

“That rings a bell,” he said. “Builder cultist. I’ve seen that somewhere.”

“Where?”

“Can’t remember,” Jason said, absently scratching his head. “I’m sure I’ve seen it, but... oh, that’s going to annoy me until I figure it out.”

Emir drained his second glass.

“That’s really good, thank you,” he said, standing up. “I’ll leave you to it; I want to call in on our hostess before I go.”

“She didn’t look in the best way, yesterday,” Jason said. “She took Jonah’s death hard.”

“Danielle blames herself for the expedition’s failures. Not as much as she blames Elspeth Arella, but still. Then once she thinks it’s all over, her family loses someone else.”

“I knew Jonah,” Jason said. “He was easy to hate, but also hard to stop yourself from liking. Eventually. We need to get these people.”

“Yes we do,” Emir said as he stepped off the porch. “Try and remember where you heard about Builder cultists from. If we can track down any of their activities outside the astral space, it might be the thread we follow right to them.”

Jason, Humphrey and Sophie joined Clive and Belinda to travel back to the city in Clive’s airboat. Due to the space constraints, Clive’s rune tortoise, Onslow, was unable to take his usual position on the prow. Clive called him back into his body, where he appeared on Clive’s torso as a runic tattoo.

“What ability do you get when Onslow merge into you?” Jason asked.

“I can use the rune powers on his shell as spells,” Clive said.

“That’s nice,” Humphrey said. “It’s like having even more essence abilities. That’s a fantastic familiar power.”

Humphrey’s own familiar, Stash, was currently in puppy form, laid back in Belinda’s lap, getting a scratch on the tummy. He suddenly struggled out of Belinda’s clutches and started trying to push himself into Humphrey’s leg.

“Silly boy,” Humphrey said, picking him up. “You can’t go inside me; you’re not that kind of familiar.”

Puppy Stash let out a little whine, giving Humphrey a pouty look before transforming into a bird.

“No!” Humphrey yelled as bird Stash leapt from his hand and promptly got sucked through the magical ring at the rear as it pull air through itself to propel the boat.

“Again?” Clive asked as he slowed down the airboat. “Every time, this happens.”

“You’ve heard me tell him,” Humphrey said.

“You need to get control of your familiar,” Clive said.

“You aren’t in any more control of your familiar,” Humphrey said. “It’s just so slow that you can’t tell it’s running away.”

The airboat came to a full stop and a frog the size of a St. Bernard swam up to the side, threatening to tip the airboat as it tried to climb on.

“You’re too big,” Humphrey told it and it turned back into a puppy that adorably scrambled at the side of the boat before plopping back into the water. Humphrey reached down to pluck it out, ignoring how wet his clothes were getting as he held Stash to his chest.

“Poor little guy. It happened again, didn’t it?”

The wet puppy snuggled into Humphrey’s chest as Clive started the boat up again. As they closed in on the city, Jason remembered the voice chat they had as they left.

“Are you going to see Hudson about joining Rick’s team when you get to the city?” Jason asked Humphrey.

“That’s right,” Humphrey said.

“You know there was another guy who was on Thadwick’s team,” Jason said. “If we’re going to put a team together ourselves, we’ll need a healer.”

“Neil Davone,” Humphrey said. “I can go and talk to him after, but it may be too late already. Even with Thadwick on his record, people will snatch up a loose healer.”

“I should be the one to do it,” Jason said.

“Are you sure?” Humphrey asked. “You had a history with Thadwick yourself.”

“That’s why it has to be me. If it’s going to work, that air needs to be cleared.”

“Alright, then. That’ll make five, then right?”

“Yep,” Jason said.

“Who are the other two?” Clive asked.

“You and her,” Jason told him, jerking a thumb at Sophie.

“You want me on your team?”

“Of course we do,” Humphrey said.

“Don’t you want someone, I don’t know... good?”

Jason and Humphrey shared a glance and laughed.

“You are good,” Humphrey told Clive.

“I am?”

“You are,” Jason said.

“Oh,” Clive said, tilting his head with a nonplussed. “Really?”

“Don’t get me wrong; you’re no solo operator,” Jason said. “You need someone to stand between you and the bad guy, but once you have that, you’ve got the goods.”

“And she’s good too?” Clive asked, looking at Sophie.

“No, but she’s cheap,” Jason said, right before Sophie punched him on the arm.

“Ow. Don’t forget you’re my indentured servant; I can make you walk the plank. Does anyone have a plank in their storage space?”

Chapter 136: Any Team Except Yours

Jason walked up from the loop line into one the most verdant neighbourhoods on the Island, with streets and residences both full of vibrant greenery with long leaves and colourful flowers. The water-affinity of the green stone that was the foundation of the Island helped the flowers deny the encroaching autumn. The houses didn't have yards so much as grounds, with low walls that were more about decoration than security. There weren't street numbers, but family names appeared on plaques near the entry gates.

Jason found the one he was looking for and approached the gate. On the other side was a gateman reading a book in a small gazebo for shade. He clearly was more greeter than security as he looking older than the house he was guarding, although his normal aura said he was no such thing. He put his book down to approach Jason from the inside of the gate.

"May I enquire as to who is visiting?"

"Jason Asano. I'm looking for Neil Davone."

The old elf nodded and opened the gate, directing Jason to go up the path to the house and knock.

Doing just that, Jason saw some people taking drinks on a terrace and gardeners maintaining the grounds, all of whom were elves. The relaxing people glanced at him with curiosity made no move to approach as he did as instructed, going to the front door and knocking. Another elf opened the door, an older man who was the very image of understated elegance. Jason was again asked his business and he introduced himself a second time.

"Ah, Mr Asano. I was sorry to hear about your demotion and have no doubt you shall soon be rising through the ranks once more."

"You know about my demotion? And that I exist?"

"It is incumbent on the staff to keep abreast of issues that may impact the household."

"I'm guessing that's only true with a certain calibre of staff," Jason said. "I doubt everyone shares your professionalism."

"Thank you for saying, sir. Would you care to wait in the parlour while I check on the young master's availability?"

“That would be lovely,” Jason said. The elf butler led Jason into a garden parlour, just off a large courtyard filled with greenery. The elf had barely gone before a maid came in with a tea tray with finger cakes.

“Thank you,” Jason said as she poured the tea.

“This blend is from the family’s holdings in the Mistrun valley,” The maid told him as he took a sip. “They produce some of the finest tea fields in the world.”

Jason took another sip and nodded.

“I believe it,” he said, giving her a smile. “I can’t think of a finer cup I’ve had.”

“Thank you, sir,” the maid said before withdrawing. Jason enjoyed the breeze drifting in from the courtyard, carrying with it a pleasant scent of flowers. Once he finished the first cup he poured himself another and helped himself to one of the cakes as he waited. When Neil Davone finally entered, Jason got up to greet him.

They sat down, Neil pouring tea for himself into the other cup.

“So what brings you to my home, Asano?” Neil asked. Jason read his tone as civil, with an undercurrent of either challenge or resentment.

“The same reason I imagine all manner of young adventurers have come by,” Jason said.

“You want a healer. You’re putting together a team.”

“Yes. Before we get into that, can I ask you something?”

“Go ahead,” Neil said.

“Everyone I’ve seen here is an elf.”

“That’s not a question,” Neil said. “We’re an elven household; what’s odd about that?”

“Are you adopted?” Jason asked.

“No,” Neil said.

“Your parents are elves?”

“Of course they are,” Neil said. “What are you getting at?”

“Is your milkman a human?”

“What in the world are you talking about?” Neil asked.

“I’m just wondering why you aren’t an elf,” Jason said.

“I am an elf.”

“You’re an elf?”

Annoyed, Neil brushed back his hair to reveal a tapered ear.

“Wow,” Jason said, not hiding his surprise.

“Why would you think I’m a human?” Neil asked.

“Well, it’s just... look. Elves are a slender bunch. Except for Lucian Lamprey, who is probably on some kind of magicalroids, but that’s beside the point. For a human, your proportions are completely healthy. For an elf, though, you’re bit of a chunker.”

“Excuse me?”

“You know; an extra bit of heft. Too much time at the sandwich shop. An overenthusiastic between-meal snacker.”

“Are you saying I’m fat?”

“I’m not saying you’re fat,” Jason assured him. “I don’t think that’s even possible for essence users. I’m just saying you look fat. For an elf.”

“This is how you try and recruit someone?” Neil asked incredulously.

“It does seem like I’m negging you, doesn’t it?” Jason asked with an apologetic grimace. “Sorry. I really don’t want to be that guy.”

“Negging?”

“What it really comes down to is that I’m less of a best foot forward guy than an honest foot forward guy,” Jason said. “What you see is what you get, and if you join up with us, there’ll be a lot of this, if I’m being honest. Which I am. You’ve seen me at my most petty when I was dealing with Thadwick. I could say that’s not a representative sample but that would be a lie. You should have seen my two-star promotion hearing. The transcript of that one must read very strangely.”

“Maybe that’s why you got demoted,” Neil said pointedly.

“Wouldn’t shock me,” Jason said cheerfully. “So, on to the issue of forming a team. The first question is whether you’ve already joined a team. I’m sure you’ve had offers.”

“I have had offers,” Neil said. “The family is weighing them over.”

“I’m guessing they want to put you on a good team. You did them a solid by putting up with Thadwick all that time.”

“That is a concern for my family and not for you,” Neil said. “Why should I give so much as a moment’s consideration to joining your team?”

“I don’t have any kind of elaborate pitch,” Jason said. “All I have for you are two things; the reasons we want you to join us and the reasons you’ll want you to join us.”

“You think I actually want to join you?”

“Of course not,” Jason said. “You haven’t thought about it, yet. Let’s start with why we want you to join us.”

“Why would I care about your reasons?”

“Because if you join us, we’ll be your team, and what we think about each other will matter. Consider how Thadwick’s attitude affected your old team.”

"You don't know anything about our team."

"I'm not saying I do," Jason said. "I'm just saying think about it. How did Thadwick treat you? How did that affect the team? Same for your other team member, Dustin."

Neil frowned but didn't argue the point.

"We know you're a good healer," Jason said. "Rufus Remore said you're the real thing and that really means something."

"Rufus Remore said I was good?"

"More than once," Jason said. "I may talk a lot of crap but he doesn't. If he says you're the goods, then you are. That's not why we want you though. It certainly doesn't hurt but that's not what we're looking for. You went against your own church out of principle. You stood up for people because it was right, even when it cost you. That's what we're looking for."

Jason gave Neil a wry smile.

"I know I'm an arrogant fool," Jason said. "You work with what you have. It may seem like I have no guiding principles, but I do. You stood up for what you thought was right, which just so happened to help my friend Jory and who knows how many others. Whatever else happens, whether you join our team or tell us to take a hike, I want you to know that I respect you for that. I doubt you much care what I respect or don't, but there it is."

"You keep saying us," Neil said. "Who is on this team of yours, exactly? I'm assuming Humphrey Geller. Is Jory Tillman on it, too?"

"Not Jory," Jason said. "He's all about that medical research and isn't looking for a life of adventure. It's me and Humphrey, like you said. There's also a Magic Society guy, if Emir Bahadir doesn't poach him, and my indentured servant."

"Bahadir wants to steal your team member?"

"He wants to employ him for non-adventure related purposes. He's a dab hand with the practical application of magical theory. Solid ritual magic, a bit of artifice. He just did an upgrade of the Gellers' mirage chamber."

"And did you say your indentured servant?"

"Yep," Jason said. "She's doesn't have her Adventure Society membership yet, but we're training her up."

"This isn't exactly convincing," Neil said. "A magical researcher and a halfway slave who isn't even in the Society?"

"Like I said; we're training her up. She should be practising with Phoebe Geller in a training room in the cloud palace, right now. That kind of company, in that kind of location, should tell you something all by itself."

Neil shook his head.

"She was the thief everyone was chasing, right?"

"That's her," Jason said.

"And now she's training in the cloud palace to be an adventurer. How does something like that even happen?"

"The short answer? Me. Really, though, it's the same way anything happens. You look at what you want to happen, then figure out what it'll take to get there from where you are. You can do almost anything if you're willing to do what it takes. People mostly fail at things because they balk at what they have to do. It's not that the path isn't there but that they aren't willing to walk it. There's a price they aren't willing to pay, be it literal, political, social, whatever. But if you're willing to commit, impossible is just a word for people convincing themselves not to try."

Jason gave Neil an easy smile.

"You're not one of those people," Jason said. "You proved that when you stood in front of your whole church and told them no."

"I did think that stopping them was impossible," Neil said.

"Yet you stood up to them and stopped them. Most people would have stood aside without ever finding out and that's the difference. You tried. That's something I want on my team."

"What about why I would want to join?" Neil asked. "You aren't exactly enticing me with tales of a double-demoted guy and his indentured servant forming a team."

"In fairness, she may be temporary. Her indenture is six months and she may quit after, I don't know."

"It sounds like you're trying to convince me to join any team except yours."

"You want a reason to join our team? Humphrey Geller is the reason."

"I've been on a team with a big name," Neil said. "That has the exact opposite of appeal."

"It's not the name," Jason said. "It's the man. Did you hear we once ran into a marsh hydra?"

"I heard. Thadwick though it was a lie."

"Of course he did," Jason said. "It came on us unexpectedly, through a submerged tunnel while we were deep underground. Humphrey was by the exit and could have gotten

clear. It was too small a hole for the monster to chase him but Humphrey didn't even look at the way out. He came and he stood by us because we weren't close enough to reach that way out. And he's the one who fought it, too. The rest of us just hung around at the back and tried not to die."

Jason drained his teacup and got to his feet.

"Everyone knows what Thadwick did to you during the expedition," he said.

"Humphrey Geller will never do that. He'll walk into a field of death for no more reason than you're there already. I have to imagine that appeals to a man who literally stood in the path of his own church."

Jason snagged the last finger cake from the tray.

"We aren't the most impressive team," Jason said. "What you need to remember though, is that you and I are adventurers. Ask yourself, what's more valuable than people who will stand shoulder to shoulder with you when things are at their worst?"

Jason bit the small piece of cake in half, muttering appreciatively.

"Thanks for your time, Neil. And the tea. If you'd told your butler to kick me out, it would have been understandable."

Neil got up and showed Jason to the door. As he watched Jason walk toward the gate, he called out to him.

"Yeah?" Jason asked, turning back.

"You have a shadow teleport, right?"

"That's right."

"And that hydra caught you deep underground, right?"

"Yeah."

"Couldn't you have gotten to that exit, too?"

Jason scratched his head, absently thinking out it.

"It never occurred to me," Jason said. "It was really scary."

Chapter 137: More Than One Clown

Phoebe Geller walked through the Adventure Society campus to the north shore. The cloud palace loomed off the end of the dock, dwarfing any building in Greenstone. Emir's chief of staff, Constance, came across the cloud bridge to meet her.

"Mistress Geller," Constance greeted. "This way, please."

"This is a treat," Phoebe said as they crossed the cloud bridge to the entrance. "Everyone wants to take a look in here."

"Mr Bahadir has had many fruitful dealings with the Geller family," Constance said. "He is happy to welcome you, albeit vicariously through me. Adding to his own affairs, recent events have been a heavy claimant on his time."

"I wouldn't expect a gold-ranker to make time for an iron-ranker like me. Even a silver-ranker, like yourself, is more than edifying."

The cloud bridge spanned a few metres over the water below, leading to the large door that served as the main entrance. Like all doors on the palace, it was not an actual door but a section of wall marked out from the rest by its blue colouration and gold edging.

"Wait here a moment please," Constance requested as she walked straight through. A few moments later, the door started rippling like the surface of a pond.

"Please enter," Phoebe heard Constance say. After a brief moment of hesitation, she stepped through. Inside was a huge atrium with vast open space and large windows that just looked like more wall from the outside. There were doorways, two grand staircases and plants all over, in planters, decorative pots and even growing right out of the walls. Most impressive was a plant-ringed pond between the two staircases, fed by a small waterfall from two floors up.

"Wow," Phoebe said. "He really fits all this in a bottle?"

"The plants are the trickiest part," Constance said. "It's almost impossible to place living material inside dimensional storage, and even then, only some carefully chosen plants are viable. Your aura signature had been added to the cloud palace's registry, so you'll be able to access any of the unrestricted areas of the palace. That's now, or on any future visit."

"Thank you," Phoebe said, still craning her neck as she looked around.

"Miss Wexler is in one of our training rooms. If you'll follow me, please."

Constance led Phoebe through the palace, and out from the main building, along a walkway that rested on the surface of the water towards one of the four surrounding wings.

A fresh breeze played through the open-air passage as water sloshed against the side. They entered the guest wing, passing a ballroom, a lounge and a dining hall on the way to an elevation platform that took them up two levels.

They stepped off in a training hall that occupied the entire level and was the height of a three-storey building. The walls were almost all transparent, giving views of the shore, the ocean and the other wings of the palace. The platform deposited them in an observation area, separated from the rest by a translucent barrier. It was raised higher than the main combat area and included two change rooms, rows of seats and a drinks cabinet, all pointed out by Constance.

On the other side of the barrier was the main combat area, currently full of artificial terrain made from cloud-stuff. The cloud was wildly coloured in blue, purple, orange and gold, making for a strange, alien landscape. Moving through it at blistering speed was a woman being pursued by faceless people and monsters; training dummies, rendered from the colourful and apparently quite versatile cloud-stuff.

"That is Miss Sophie Wexler," Constance said as they watched the woman dart about the room. The dummies chasing her were various shapes and sizes, from humanoid to monster, waist-high to bigger than a long-hall wagon. The smaller figures were quick and chased after her directly. The larger forms clambered right over the terrain or sent lengthy tentacles snaking around it.

Sophie had her hair tied back in a simple ponytail that flicked around behind her head. Her clothes were light and loose, white against her dark skin. She was practically flying around the room, making the most of the terrain with her speed and agility. Using movement to spread out the pursuing dummies, she would isolate a few at a time and turn the tables, thrashing them with a flurry of attacks before escaping, leaving the encroaching reinforcements behind.

Phoebe noted there was some kind of power attached to each of Sophie's strikes as only a few blows would tear the smaller dummies to pieces. Against the larger ones she employed hit and run tactics, taking them down across multiple attacks. Big or small, however, each fallen dummy was immediately replaced with another, creating an unwinnable challenge.

Phoebe sat down to watch as Constance took her leave. The acrobatic techniques Sophie used seemed wild and inefficient to Phoebe's eyes, yet she made it work. She was unarmed, yet the terrain became her weapon as she flitted about like a dragonfly. Her speed and agility were incredible, to the point Phoebe had a hard time believing she was iron rank.

Phoebe looked on in fascination as Sophie fought off waves of endlessly replenishing monsters. Inevitably she Sophie started to flag and her opponents came closer and closer to boxing her in. Eventually, she was overrun, going down fighting before the dummies and terrain vanished as she collapsed beneath their attacks. The sudden empty combat area left Sophie on her back, panting on a suddenly flat, wide-open area.

She rolled over onto her front, pushing herself heavily onto her knees then and then feet. She glanced over at Phoebe through the transparent barrier and trudged over, up the slope leading to the raised barrier and straight through the wall.

“You can only walk through it while the room is inactive,” Sophie said, seeing Phoebe’s surprised expression. “You don’t have to worry about a loose dummy getting thrown through it.”

There were two open-faced drink cabinets on the wall. One was filled with various kinds of liquor and a stack of small glasses. The other had glasses of chilled water, from which Sophie took one and drained it. She threw it at the wall, into which it vanished without a sound as she took a second from the cabinet. New glasses emerged from the back of the cabinet to replace the one she took, water pouring from above to fill them.

Phoebe still had traces of her family’s Greenstone origins, but was lighter-skinned than the locals, being from a distant branch family. Her hair was light brown, in a pixie cut that was short and practical but flattered her round face and delicate features.

“You don’t look much like Geller,” Sophie said.

“If you mean Humphrey, we’re only distant cousins. I’m Phoebe Geller.”

“Sophie Wexler. I’ve heard you can fight.”

“I’ve heard the same about you,” Phoebe said with a challenging grin. “You mostly seemed to be running away, though.”

“Oh, is that how it is?” Sophie asked.

“Think you can prove me wrong?”

Sophie pointed at one of the changing rooms.

“You can get changed in there.”

Jason caught the loop line back from the Davone residence and spotted a familiar face as he emerged from the Adventure Society transit terminal.

“Gary,” he called out with a wave and hurried over to his friend. He hadn’t seen him in weeks and clasped the big furry man in a quick hug.

“Cripes, Gary. I don’t like to question a man’s hygiene but I haven’t seen you in two weeks and I don’t think you’ve seen a shower. You want some crystal wash?”

Gary looked tired and dishevelled, although not so much as the man next to him. He was a human in scholarly robes with a lopsided Magic Society official's pin on his chest. He had an unruly mop of hair and an unkempt beard. His iron-rank aura meant his mid-thirties appearance was probably accurate. All in all, he looked like a slightly older, homeless version of Clive.

"I'm pretty ripe on the vine, alright," Gary said. "We've been in a workshop all week, sleeping on cots. Me and Russell here have been going over the remains of the construct monsters the expedition brought back," Gary said. "I've been stripping them down for Russell to figuring out how they work."

"We've been trying to work out how someone either snuck in or built from scratch a whole army of animated constructs without anyone realising," Russell said. "What Clive told us this morning about the origin of the people we're facing filled in some important pieces and we had a breakthrough."

"He had a breakthrough," Gary said. "I was just taking the things apart."

"Don't even try and play down your contribution," Russell said. "Without your expertise in deconstructing the intact specimen, the crucial piece could have been damaged, overlooked or lost entirely."

"Take the compliment, Gary," Jason said. "Russell, I think we've met."

"Yes," Russell said. "I was present for your initial Adventure Society intake. I've heard about you a lot since."

"You have?"

"If nothing else," Russell said, "Lucian Lamprey really, really doesn't like you."

"The feeling's mutual."

"I'm Russell Clouns," he introduced himself. "Nice to meet you again."

"Likewise," Jason said. "Clowns, you say?"

"Yes, Clouns."

"As in, more than one clown?"

"I'm not sure I follow."

"I'm talking about multiple clouns."

"The Clouns aren't a big or prestigious family," Russell said, confusion still plain on his face.

"But you're a whole family of clouns," Jason said.

"Uh, yes? I'm still not sure why that matters."

"I thought you'd have bigger shoes."

"Shoes?" Russell asked, looking down.

“Jason,” Gary said, “we’re both too tired for you right now.”

“Yeah, you should probably just go,” Jason told him, then turned back to Russell. “Do you all travel around in one tiny carriage?”

“Some portion of this conversation definitely seems to have gotten past me,” Russell said.

“No, that’s just Jason,” Gary said. “He takes some getting used to. Jason, we have to go report some findings and then get some sleep.”

“You look like you’ve been working hard.”

“Yeah,” Gary said. “We found something important, though.”

“Good going,” Jason said. “You can tell me all about it once you wake up.”

“I’m thinking that will be about two days,” Gary said, Russell nodding his agreement. They parted ways, Jason watching as they trudged tiredly toward the administration building.

➤ [\[Russel Clouns\] has been added to your contact list.](#)

“That’s disappointing,” Jason mused to himself. “Finding out clowns were all a family of interdimensional travellers would have been fun.”

Sophie and Phoebe gulped down large glasses of water, Phoebe following Sophie’s lead in throwing her empty glass at the wall. They took fresh glasses from the cooler cabinet and sprawled into seats. Phoebe sighed as the soft cloud furniture enveloped her.

“You can really fight,” Phoebe said.

“You too,” Sophie agreed. “I’m envious of all those special attacks.”

“I’m envious of that ability that negates them. Only my biggest attacks got through at all and I couldn’t believe how quickly you learned to pick them out and dodge. You’re impossible to pin down.”

Phoebe settled happily in her chair, sipping at her second glass while Sophie moved into a meditative, cross-legged pose. Sophie recovered quickly, looking fresh when her eyes snapped open.

“Is that a recovery power?” Phoebe asked and Sophie nodded.

“Nice. Is it just mana and stamina, or health, too?”

“All three.”

“Nice. Not much good in a fight, but don’t underestimate the value of quick recovery between skirmishes. When things went wrong in the big expedition it was a series of

running battles. We'd sometimes only get moments between fights and a power like that would make a huge difference."

"I'm not looking for any big battles," Sophie said.

"When you're an adventurer," Phoebe said, "they sometimes come looking for you."

"Adventurer," Sophie said. "I'm not sure I'm ready to pass that assessment."

"It's not that hard," Phoebe said. "Mostly they'll test your combat ability and you have no problems there. Always pay attention to what you're going to be up against. If you can afford it, buy a monster catalogue from the Magic Society so you can look up the next monster. Know what they can do going in and be ready for it. The other thing they'll test is judgement. If the invigilators try throwing you at something and it doesn't feel right, then tell them no. It's what they're looking for."

"Thanks," Sophie said. "This whole thing is crazy. I can't tell if meeting Asano was the best or the worst thing that ever happened to me. You know him, right?"

"Not well, but he's not hard to figure out."

"He's not?"

"Jason is a lot like Danielle Geller," Phoebe said. "She's subtle and refined where he's outrageous and disruptive, but they operate the same way. There's always a sense with Danielle that she's playing a game only she knows about. It's like you only ever see her from an angle. Jason is the same, except loud and distracting instead of subtle and nuanced. Basically, they're both good people who think like bad people."

"That might explain why I always come away feeling disoriented," Sophie said.

Phoebe laughed. "Yeah, I know that feeling."

"But you think he's a good guy?"

"I do," she said. "I've seen a little and heard a lot. That said, I should really show you this recording of a fight he had with my brother."

"Geller – Humphrey – said something about a recording," Sophie said.

"Oh, it's something to see," Phoebe said. "I can bring it along if you want to do this again. There has to be a projector in this place somewhere, right?"

"I'd like that," Sophie said.

"What do you mean, no one's here?" Gary asked.

"They are all important people, undertaking their own tasks to respond to this threat," Genevieve said. "They aren't just waiting around for people to come and tell them things. They will convene this evening and you can request to be heard then. Otherwise, the head

of the inquisition team is present. At this moment she is the highest-ranked Adventure Society official in Greenstone."

"Forget that lady," Gary said. "Russell; go home and get some sleep. I'm going to the cloud palace. Either Bahadir is there or I can get some sleep. It's a victory either way."

As Jason arrived at the cloud palace, his mood and expression both went icy when he spotted Thalia Mercer departing. She spotted him in turn and they met halfway across the cloud bridge.

"Hello Jason," she greeted.

"Thalia."

"I'm sorry about how things ended with you and Cassandra."

"I don't care."

Anger crossed Thalia's face.

"My daughter isn't worth enough for you to care about losing her?"

"Of course she is," Jason said, resuming his passage across the bridge by walking past her. "I don't care that you're sorry."

Chapter 138: Resurrection

Emir's private study occupied the entire domed top floor of the cloud palace's tallest and most central tower. One of the restricted areas of the palace, the only access without the power of flight was an elevating platform from lower floors. It would not activate for anyone but Constance and Emir, requiring Constance to escort Jason and Clive up. Emir had the dome set to almost full transparency, subtly dimming the bright sunlight while keeping the room fresh and cool.

At a glance, the room seemed mostly empty, aside from the people in it and a few small circles of water in the floor from which plants were growing. The only furniture was the seats the existing occupants were sitting in, but two more rose up from the floor to accommodate Jason and Clive. Constance departed, riding the platform back down, only for a new platform to manifest in its place.

"Thank you for coming," Emir said to them as they sat. Already in the room were Gary and Russell, both looking better for regular meals, showers and a couple of good night's sleep. They exchanged greetings, Jason noting that Clive and Russell seemed to know each other well. Clive had expounded more than once of the state of Magic Society personnel, but it seemed Russell was amongst the few Clive considered genuinely capable.

"You were lucky to catch us," Jason said. "We're about to take Wexler out for another monster run."

"Are you going to be working on group tactics?" Emir asked.

"Humphrey's gotten excited about devising tactics based around our team setup," Jason said. "Finally putting all that training his family gave him to use. We're still short a healer but we can at least get a start on things."

"I'm surprised you're leaving it to Humphrey instead of doing it yourself," Gary said.

"I may be a little self-impressed..."

"A little?" Clive interjected, getting a chuckle from Gary.

"Yes," Jason said, panning a pointed look from one to the other. "A little. I know better than to think I know more than someone with training or experience."

"You do?" Gary asked.

"Yes," Jason said. "I do."

His shoulders slumped. "Farrah hammered that into me. She wouldn't put up with it."

The room fell silent for a moment as all eyes fell to the floor, except for Russell who was smart enough to stay quiet.

“We found something,” Gary said, breaking the reverie.

“We’re pretty sure this is how they made all those constructs,” Russell added, taking a small object wrapped in cloth from a pocket in his robes. “Gary said you have an ability to identify objects and thought we should show you, to confirm.”

He went to pass Jason the item, but Jason stopped him with a raised hand. Jason then added Emir, Gary and Russell to the party that already contained him and Clive.

“This ability has so much potential,” Emir said. “How many people can you include at a time?”

“Myself plus nine more,” Jason said.

Russell opened the cloth and took out the object inside. It was the size and shape of a monster core but made up of intricate, clockwork mechanisms.

“Touch it,” Jason said.

Item: [Clockwork Core] (iron rank, rare)

The core of an artificial monster. (crafting material, magic core).

- **Effect:** When used as the core of a construct creature, the materials and processes used are significantly simplified.

“That is useful,” Russell said. “Can you do this for any item?”

“It doesn't work on very high-rank items,” Jason said.

“Still, possibilities abound. You should come work for the Magic Society.”

Jason groaned.

“I’ve told him, believe me,” Clive said.

Russell wrapped the core back up, returning it to his pocket.

“Thank you for that, Jason,” Emir said. “It’s nice to confirm what we’re dealing with.”

“So, these things are how they were able to build their construct army,” Jason said.

“Did the Builder supply them?”

“Not directly,” Russell said. “Clockwork cores are produced by a creature called a clockwork king.”

“Some kind of monster?” Clive asked.

“No,” Russell said. “I managed to find some records on clockwork cores in the temple of knowledge’s library, including their source, these clockwork kings.”

“What manner of creature are they?” Jason asked.

"In our world, creatures like dragons are highly magical, but they are actual creatures that are born, live and die. They aren't monsters. Clockwork kings are the same, but they aren't native to our world. They're native to the world the Builder has created."

"You think they've come here, somehow?" Jason asked.

"Yes," Russell said. "The bad news is, they're gold-rank entities. The good news is that I don't think there is one in this area. The constructs the expedition encountered were simple affairs. Basically, blocks of wood, stone and metal slapped together around one of these cores. Clockwork kings use the cores they create to craft more intricate and elaborate constructs. We haven't seen anything like what the records I found describe."

"If they're crafting things, does that mean they're intelligent?" Jason asked.

"Oh, yes," Russell said. "They are likely to occupy key leadership positions."

"Are they artificial creatures themselves, or living things?" Jason asked.

"From my understanding of the Builder's world," Clive contributed, "that isn't a strict delineation."

"That comports with what I found as well," Russell agreed.

"Is there any chance there is a clockwork king here and the best constructs are being held back to hide that fact?" Jason asked. "Lull us into a false sense of security?"

"It's possible," Emir said. "I think they would have used them to try and hold the astral space from us, though."

"It's unlikely," Clive said. "Travel between worlds is not easy to arrange, even for a great astral being like the Builder. They can't facilitate it directly because they're inimical to physical reality. An attempt to directly interact with a physical reality would be too destructive. As far as I'm aware, travelling between realities is the domain of diamond rankers, which means the Builder would have to rely on how many diamond-rankers he can spare from whatever other interests he has going on throughout the cosmos."

"You said destructive," Jason said. "I wouldn't have thought the Builder would care about that."

"It doesn't," Clive said. "The World-Phoenix does, however, and the great astral beings are careful about encroaching upon one another's interests. It's why they don't just resurrect any of their key minions who get killed as outworlders."

"What do you mean, resurrect?" Gary asked.

"It's about how death works," Clive said. "When the soul dies, it only lingers with the body for a small-time. Usually minutes, but an annihilated body might have the soul depart in seconds, while freezing to death might have it linger for an hour or even longer. It's why

if a gold rank healer can repair the body in that grace period, the death can be turned back."

"I didn't realise that was possible," Jason said, not the only one in the room thinking bitterly of Farrah.

"For those of us who don't die next to one of the most powerful healers in the world," Clive said, "our souls leave the body and the physical reality it's in. An untethered soul is an astral object and drifts into the astral."

"Where do outworlders come into it?" Gary asked, glancing at Jason.

"An outworlder is someone whose soul has re-entered a physical reality, reflexively manifesting a body for itself," Clive explained.

"Like a monster," Jason added.

"Yes," Clive said. "An outworlder's body is akin to that of a monster, or a summoned familiar. It is physical substance forged out of raw magic. An in-between existence of the astral and the physical."

"That's how you described astral spaces," Emir pointed out.

"I did," Clive said. "The analogy is apt. The point, however, is that an outworlder is a soul that has been pushed, by whatever means, from the astral and into a physical reality. This normally happens when natural, magical phenomena connect one physical reality with another, creating a channel that drags someone between the two realities. Their body is annihilated as it passes through the astral, then reconstitutes itself when entering its new physical reality."

"I see what you're saying," Jason said. "If one of these great astral beings took one of the souls floating around the astral and shoved it into a world, it would do what souls do when that happens. It would make a new body and you have someone resurrected as an outworlder."

"Exactly," Clive said. "They don't do that, though, because of the astral being called the Reaper."

"Is this the same Reaper, as in, Way of the Reaper?" Jason asked.

"What do you know about the Way of the Reaper?" Emir asked, eyes narrowing as he looked at Jason.

"That it was the martial art of an ancient order of assassins."

"The Order of the Reaper," Clive said. "And yes; it's the same Reaper. The Reaper is very big on the finality of death. Some consider it the true god of death, as all our god of death governs is the passage of the soul into the astral. The final resting place of souls is the astral, where our gods hold no sway."

“And the other great astral beings don’t take the souls they want and resurrect them because they won’t cross the Reaper,” Emir said.

“Exactly,” Clive said. “For the same reason, the Builder doesn’t just smash apart worlds and take the pieces it likes, because it will not cross the World-Phoenix. So the Builder gathers followers to carve off astral spaces, leaving the worlds they are attached to battered, but intact.”

“So you’re saying,” Gary said, “that if we convince this Reaper to give her up, we can bring Farrah back?”

“Don't even think about it," Clive said. "The Reaper would never entertain the request of mortals. It would disdain a diamond-ranker, let alone any of us."

“What about this ancient order?” Gary asked. “Bahadir, you’re here to investigate them right? You must know something.”

“I do,” Emir said. “I know the Order of the Reaper were an ancient cult of assassins. They brought death. I have seen no indication anywhere, ever, that they even tried to reverse it. I also know that they were scoured from this world, root and branch, by a coalition of churches, long ago. Only ruins filled with the dead remain.”

“Even if they still existed,” Clive said, “they venerated the Reaper. Bringing someone back would be anathema to them.”

“Do not let the hope of bringing her back take hold in you, Gareth,” Emir said. “Let her live in memory. Trying to bring her back will only stain those memories.”

“There has to be a way,” Gary said.

“Gary,” Clive said. “Even gods can’t bring her back.”

“Maybe we should return our attention to the problems at hand,” Russell suggested. “The clockwork kings.”

“Yes,” Emir agreed firmly. “The most likely scenario is that the Builder was unable to send enough to this world to spare one on a low-magic area like Greenstone. They would have sent the minimal number of people, recruiting locals and using these clockwork cores to literally build their numbers up.”

“So what do we do with this information?” Russell asked.

“Like everything else, we’ll disseminate it to the wider Adventure Society and hope it helps,” Emir said.

“You stripped those construct creatures down to the base components, right?” Clive asked. “If there is anything you found them using that that’s hard to source locally, get a list to Rufus Remore. He’s already following that trail and it might help him.”

“We can do that,” Russell said. “If we’re done here, we can go and look through our notes right now. Gary?”

Gary said nothing but gave a sullen nod.

“We’ll be off too, then,” Jason said.

“Thank you all for coming,” Emir said. “Jason, we’ve set Farrah’s wake for the end of the week. Be sure and be back for that.”

“I thought we weren’t doing anything for Farrah until her body was back home with her family,” Clive said.

“This is informal,” Emir said. “Something for those of us here who knew her.”

“Beth Cavendish’s team wanted to attend.”

“They fought with us during the expedition,” Gary said. “I’ll see they’re notified.”

“Alright, then,” Jason said. “We’ll be off. Do I need someone to work the elevator?”

“No,” Emir said. “It won’t take you up, but it will take you down just fine.”

Clive and Jason walked over to the elevation platform and descended out of sight.

“I’m sorry,” Emir told Gary. “I didn’t expect the discussion to go in that direction.”

“It’s alright,” Gary nodded. “It’s just... everything fell apart when she died. Rufus and I have barely spoken since we got back. I haven’t felt this alone in a long time.

Gary, Russell and Emir had a message pop up in front of them.

➤ [Party leader \[Jason Asano\] has kicked you from the group.](#)

They all looked at the message, then Gary let out a tension-breaking laugh.

“Well, that’s just rude,” he said.

Chapter 139: Manifestation

Four people were in Sophie and Belinda's guest suite as a recording was playing on a crystal recording projector. Sophie and Belinda were both present, as were Phoebe and Jory. Phoebe had brought the recording crystal while Belinda had roped Jory into taking a day off. He had been reluctant, but he hadn't taken a break since the clinic re-opened, and with a priest of the healer on hand, he let himself be talked into it.

Phoebe was the only one who had seen the recording of Jason's fight before. The others looked on with various reactions as they followed the recording from the perspective of Rick and his team.

"That laughter is creepy," Belinda said.

"I knew there was a dark side to Jason," Jory said, "but this is a bit much."

"A bit much is right," Sophie said. "He's being a complete ham. Wait, why is he stepping out into the open? He's just going to get speared. See, what did I just say?"

Belinda put a hand over her mouth in horror. "Did he just lick the spear?"

They watched until the recording ended, freezing with the image of Jason with his foot on the back of Jonah's head, drowning him in the mud.

"That was horrifying," Belinda said. "You had that guy chasing you?"

"Is wasn't real," Jory said, although his words sounded empty.

"It was theatrics," Sophie said. "Get into an opponent's head and you've already beaten them. That kind of over-the-top ridiculousness would only work on people with no real experience."

A melodious chime rang, indicating a visitor at the door and Belinda got up to let in Clive and Jason.

"Oh," Jason said sadly as he recognised the frozen image of himself and Jonah. "I don't like that recording being out there."

"Given how absurd you were, I can see why," Sophie said. "You spend the whole time playing ridiculous games instead of just taking them out."

"I didn't have the skills for that approach," Jason said. "There were five of them and going monster was the only thing I could think of to mess with their heads. If they were thinking straight, I would have lost."

"I'll admit it's good to show people what you'll do if they cross you," Sophie said. "Next time, cut out the maniacal laughter and stick to the horrifying death. That bit at the end where you drown the guy in mud was good."

“That man in the mud,” Jason said softly. “His name was Jonah. He’s dead for real, now, along with another member of that group. I have no interest in watching myself kill them.”

“I think it’s time for you to head off, Soph,” Belinda said. “You go fight monsters, or whatever. Jory and I going to have a picnic.”

“We are?” Jory asked.

“Yes,” Belinda said. “Thank you again for making up the basket, Jason.”

“No worries.”

Jason, Humphrey, Clive and Sophie were in the wood mill region of the delta, in the middle of a plantation forest. Their objective was a pack of monsters called flanards. Flanards were emaciated creatures with four arms and distended jaws full of pointed teeth. Individually they were weaker than margolls but appeared in even larger groups. Their numbers made them perfect for exploring team tactics, which was the reason Humphrey had selected that particular contract.

The thick plantation had trees growing in neat rows. Fighting amongst them, Sophie led three of the creatures between the trunks and into the waiting sword of Humphrey. He stepped out with a horizontal sweep that cleaved two of them in half while the other dropped to the ground, the blade barely passing over it. It sprang up and resumed its pursuit of Sophie.

Three more had been chasing after Jason but had lost him in the shadows. Spotting Sophie rush past, they joined her now lone pursuer. Sophie scrambled, seemingly in a panic as they joined the chase. She changed direction and the monsters followed, without noticing the odd mark on one of the trees. They dashed blindly after Sophie until the sound of Clive snapping his fingers preceded the ground underneath them blasting upward, the force tearing them all to pieces.

Humphrey came jogging through the woods, joining Sophie and Clive.

“That was good,” Jason said, emerging from a shadow. “Nice plan, Humphrey.”

“The key is to stay flexible,” Humphrey said. “Situations always change and rigid plans don’t work. Rather than over-complicated stratagems, if we have a learned and practiced series of flexible tactics, we can rapidly adapt to those changing situations. This was one of the simpler tactics outlined in the booklets I gave you all.”

“I can’t believe you wrote those,” Jason said. “When you do something, you don’t mess about, Humphrey. I think we’re all pretty impressed.”

The others nodded their agreement.

“Now we have them,” Humphrey said, “we need to make sure we learn them with our heads, then practise until we know them. If we combine a shared knowledge of a flexible tactical set with the communications advantage of Jason’s ability, we’ll be ready to react to any situation.”

“Like a malevolent gold-ranker who forces us into a knitting competition with our lives on the line,” Jason said.

“What?” Humphrey asked as the others looked at Jason with confusion.

“Humphrey said ‘any situation,’ so I posited a situation we might encounter.”

“How is that helpful?” Sophie asked.

“Fine,” Humphrey said. “We’ll be ready for *most* situations. These tactics are all preliminary, though. They’re worth learning to get into the habit, but they need to be adjusted once we get a healer and learn their capabilities, plus fill out our abilities, advance to bronze and so on. We’ll be adjusting and readjusting in an ongoing manner.”

“Any word on that healer?” Clive asked.

“Melissa Davone paid my mother a visit at our townhouse in the city,” Humphrey said. “Davone is at least considering joining us.”

“How many abilities do you have left to awaken?” Jason asked Humphrey.

“Two,” Humphrey said. “One from the magic essence and one from might. What about you?”

“Three. Two from dark and one from doom.”

“I still have seven to go,” Sophie said.

“Still early days, for you,” Humphrey said. “Jason and I gained our essences months ago. Getting as many as you have in under a single month is a good start.”

After Jason looted the monsters, they set out back for the city. The wood mill region was less water-accessible than most of the delta, so Clive had requisitioned a magic-propelled, open-top carriage. Clive sat in the driver’s seat, with the others in the back. When droplets of rain started coming down, they rolled off a magical barrier that covered the carriage.

“What is that?” Sophie asked with alarm.

“It’s just a barrier to keep the water off,” Clive said.

“But where’s the water coming from?” she asked. “Is a monster doing that?”

Clive looked back, sharing a confused glance with Humphrey and Jason.

“It’s just rain,” Jason said.

“Rain?” she asked.

“You don’t know what rain is?” Jason asked.

“Oh,” Humphrey said. “Have you never left the city before?”

“Not since I first went there as a girl,” Sophie said. “That was when I was very young. I don’t really remember anything before that. Are you saying water just falling out of the sky is somehow normal?”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “It doesn’t rain in the city? I thought it just hadn’t since I got here.”

“It’s one of the oddities of the local climate,” Clive said. “The combination of the desert, the delta and the water-affinity of the mass of green stone making up the Island impacts the weather in certain ways. One of those ways is that while it rains regularly in the delta, it never rains in the city.”

“That’s weird,” Jason said.

“How does the water get up in the sky?” Sophie asked.

“It evaporates,” Clive said.

“I thought you were going to say magic,” Jason said, then he and Clive between them gave a basic explanation of the water cycle.

The carriage continued on as the rain grew heavier. Sophie and Jason both looked up at the water splashing off the invisible rain barrier, Jason with wonder and Sophie with wariness. They were travelling along an embankment road through marshlands when Humphrey suddenly called out.

“Stop the carriage!”

He pointed off to the side of the road where a vortex of rainbow light was swirling in the air.

“What’s that?” Jason asked.

“A magical manifestation,” Humphrey said. “It’s rare to actually see them happen.”

“What’s a magical manifestation?” Sophie asked.

“It’s a natural manifestation of magic from the ethereal to the physical,” Clive explained. “Magic, coalescing into a physical form. Most likely it’ll be a monster, but it could be an awakening stone or even an essence. Let’s go take a look.

“How are we going to get out there?” Humphrey asked. “Jason can walk on water, but the rest of us can’t.”

“I can run on water,” Sophie said. “I sink if I stop moving, though.”

“I have something,” Clive said. “I was a bit inspired by Jason’s preparedness when we found that buried complex and put a few things into my own storage space.”

They left the carriage and its rain barrier, so they started getting wet. Sophie looked trepidatiously up at the sky as they made their way down the steep embankment to the

water's edge. Clive pulled an entire raft out of his inventory, which fell into the water. It tipped Clive off-balance in doing so and Clive went in with it and came up sputtering.

The raft wasn't large, with just enough room for Humphrey, Sophie and Clive. Clive sat sodden at the front, his wet clothes tracing out his lanky frame. With a hand on a metal panel near the front of the otherwise wooden raft, he magically directed it to drift slowly in the direction of the colourful vortex. Jason walked alongside, his cloak both letting him walk on water and keeping off the rain.

The vortex was around two metres across and despite what looked like furious roiling, didn't so much as disturb the air, as if it didn't really exist at all. They stopped and waited for the process of manifestation to be complete.

"Are we alright to be this close?" Sophie asked.

"It's fine," Clive said. "It can't affect us and we can't affect it without some high-end ritual magic."

"It's quite pretty," Jason said, taking out a recording crystal and tossing it up to float over his head. He started explaining the vortex for when he showed it to his family. After he had done that, he turned the crystal on Sophie.

"I've mentioned her in earlier entries," Jason said, "but this is her in the flesh. My nubile slave girl, Sophie Wexler."

Sophie was sitting on the raft, so her flashing jab caught him on the thigh.

"Ow. As you can see, she has some behavioural problems."

Sophie turned to Humphrey and Clive.

"If I drown him out here," she asked them, "would you two back me up and say it was an accident?"

"Absolutely," Clive said.

"Someone was going to do it sooner or later," Humphrey agreed.

"As you can see," Jason said, "she has ruthlessly suborned my minions."

"Did you just call us minions?" Humphrey asked.

"Nope," Jason said. "My voice just sounds weird because of the rain."

They waited several minutes before the vortex started to contract, growing smaller and smaller.

"It's not a monster," Clive said. "I can see the magic taking form. It's going to be an awakening stone."

"Nice," Jason said. "How do we decide who gets it?"

"Miss Wexler has the most need," Humphrey said. "You and I only have a few spots left open and should probably wait for Bahadir's event."

“Humphrey, you should call me Sophie,” she said, flashing Humphrey a rare smile before dropping it and turning to Jason.

“You shouldn’t,” she told him.

“Harsh,” Jason said.

“You did call her a slave girl,” Humphrey said.

“I think you’re misremembering,” Jason said. “That doesn’t sound like me; I’m all about egalitarianism.”

The vortex continued shrinking until it was the size of a fist, coalescing into a blue awakening stone that fell into the water with a plop. The others all turned to look at Clive.

“What?” he asked.

“You already went in once,” Humphrey said.

Clive saw the others were a unified front and groaned as he dropped off the side of the raft. The water was waist-deep but he had to plunge down to his neck as he rummaged about where the stone had dropped.

“It’s time like this that I wish Onslow were a turtle instead of a tortoise,” Clive said.

He let out a yelp of pain, lurching to his feet and waving his arm around. A small figure was being flailed about, its teeth clamped onto Clive's hand. It was thrown off and started hovering in the air. It was a small, fairy-like figure, about the size of a human hand, with a naked, androgynous body, dark blue hair and insect wings that buzzed rapidly to keep it aloft. Clutched in its arms was the awakening stone, almost as big as it was.

The stone was wet, muddy and, under the weight, the creature could barely hold itself in the air. It tried to fly off with its prize but the stone was too much, slipping through its arms and back into the water. A furious Clive made a grab at the creature, but it flitted away, turning back to poke it’s tongue out before zipping away through the air.

“I hate those things,” Clive muttered as he smeared healing ointment over the wound on his hand.

“You’ve seen those before?” Jason asked.

“Wetland Pixies? Oh, yeah. They love eating eels, so they were always hanging about the farm when I was growing up. I can’t tell you how many boots Nana lost throwing them at the damn things. She never hit anything and the boots usually landed in the bog.”

“Well you’d best get back down and grab the stone,” Jason said. “There might be more of those things in there.”

Chapter 140:

Potential

In his guest suite in the cloud palace, Rufus was at a desk with papers arrayed in front of him. Ground assessments, potential designs, integration requirements. He wearily ran his hands over his face, trying to maintain concentration. While he awaited word on various investigations, Rufus had resumed the task the academy annex he was working on with the Geller family.

Adris Dorgan had kept his word and was making progress in chasing down the materials on the lists provided by Clive and now Russell. Certain shipments had come into the port at Hornis before being moved to private vessels for destinations thus far unknown. Dorgan was currently digging deeper into the ownership of those private vessels.

Rufus found his attention constantly straying to Builder cultists. The nebulous enemy who, at that very moment was hidden away, advancing their destructive plots. He wondered how many more friends he would lose before they were finally stopped. Getting up, he walked out onto the balcony and let the sea breeze wash refreshingly over him.

He decided to leave the work for the moment and go find Gary, who seemed equally at a loss after finishing his own project with the constructs. They hadn't seen much of one another since coming back from the expedition and there was a friction there that Farrah had always smoothed out. Jason's presence had helped them through the worst of it in the wake of her death, but her absence lingered between them.

Rufus and Gary had adjacent suites in the guest wing, connected by a terrace. Rufus wandered over and saw Gary inside with a half-empty bottle of some rotgut he must have bought in the city; Emir would never stock anything so cheap and nasty. Gary had dissolved the entire outer wall of his suite, leaving it open to the fresh air. Gary, slouched in a chair, nodded his acknowledgement of Rufus' arrival.

"Day drinking?" Rufus asked. "It's barely mid-morning."

"Want to join?" Gary asked.

"Yes," Rufus said, walking over to a cabinet and grabbing a glass.

"We can do it out here?" Sophie asked, looking uncertainly at the village around them.

"Clive can," Jason said. "He's more flexible than most, so he can do it just about anywhere you have a flat space."

“It might seem unusual for the two of you to just up and do it in the middle of a village square,” Humphrey said, “but it’s something the villagers will be eager to see.”

“It won’t take long,” Jason said. “Clive can just slip it into you out here and we can head off.”

“He’s right; it won’t take long,” Clive assured her. “Even in less comfortable conditions, I’m very quick to finish.”

“Alright,” Sophie said. “It’s not like it’s my first time.”

“You heard the lady, Clive,” Jason said. “Whip it out.”

Clive took out the awakening stone they retrieved from the marsh and passed it to Sophie.

Item: [Awakening Stone of the Rain] (unranked, common)

An awakening stone containing the power of rain. (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
- Effect: Awakens an essence ability.
- You have 8 unawakened essence abilities.

Using his abilities, he balanced out the ambient magic and drew a ritual circle. As Humphrey predicted, doing so in the village square drew curious onlookers. The ritual went off without incident, awakening Sophie’s new ability.

Ability: [Between the Raindrops] (Swift)

- Special ability.
- Cost: High mana per second and high stamina per second.
- Cooldown: None.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)
- Effect (iron): Increased reflexes and spatial awareness.

“That’s it?” Humphrey asked. “That seems like an exhaustive cost for increased reflexes.”

“Attack her,” Jason said.

“What?” Humphrey asked.

“Attacker her,” Jason said. “You come in from the right and I’ll pincer her from the left.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“Do it,” Sophie said. “No weapons.”

Jason grinned and leapt forward, Humphrey doing the same with a grimace. They unleashed simultaneously from either side but it was like Sophie had eyes in the back of her head. Not only did she react to their every move, but she did so the moment they made them. Soon, Humphrey was sent stumbling back from a kick to the face. Jason had it worse, folded over on the ground as he clutching his crotch with both hands.

“Did you have to go right for the plums?” he squeaked out.

She walked over and looked down at him.

“You’re the one who wanted to attack me,” she said.

Neil Davone had started spending time at the Mercer family compound as a boy. Thadwick had needed friends his own age and the Davone and Kettering families, with their close ties to the Mercers, had frequently sent their own boys over. The Mercer residence was the most impressive in Greenstone, with its five interconnected towers and immaculate grounds. Even with tyrannical toddler Thadwick as a playmate, it had always been an exciting place to visit, growing up.

As he had gotten older, the attractions of the Mercer household for Neil went through various changes. As he became more curious about the world, the impressive library fed his mind. When he became an essence user, he made full use of the training facilities that Thadwick disdained. The rest of the Mercers were more than happy to let Neil and his teammate Dustin use them as much as they liked. After all, their job was to keep Thadwick alive.

Another change in what made the Mercer compound alluring as Neil grew up was the presence of Thadwick’s older sister, Cassandra. As with many young men in the Mercer family orbit, the smart, capable and gorgeous young woman was the object of his youthful affection. Four years older than him, she was the unattainable image of beauty and sophistication in the eyes of thirteen-year-old Neil. She left the city with her mother after reaching bronze rank, putting an end to his boyhood crush.

Cassandra and her mother had been back in the city for six months, in preparation for the monster surge. Many young men once again clamoured for her attention but Neil was not one of them. It had been one thing putting up with Thadwick as children, but they were adventurers, now. His selfishness and incompetence brought with it genuine danger, culminating in his abandonment of them during the expedition. Aside from Cassandra and her mother, the ones who had left, he had become soured on anything with the Mercer

name. Any idea of reigniting youthful passions and pursuing her ended the moment he thought of her family.

By the time he heard that Cassandra and Jason Asano were an item, he had seen Asano for himself and not found him to be anything special. He was just another in a line of self-impressed people who thought they were bold and clever for making Thadwick look like a fool. Neil knew it may just have been his lingering affection, but his opinion of Cassandra was still high enough that he wondered what she saw that elevated Asano above the pack.

Asano's visit to Neil's home had left him uncertain as to what to do. Ostensibly, Neil had received better offers, the only real point of attraction to Asano's being the participation of Humphrey Geller. Neil knew for a fact that behind closed doors, Humphrey was the person the Mercer's wished Thadwick had become. Their family situations had provided Thadwick and Humphrey with the same opportunities, yet Humphrey was lauded while Thadwick was dismissed.

After Asano's visit to his home, Neil's intention had been to dismiss the offer out of hand. There were things about Asano that kept playing on his mind, however, starting with why he had been the one to make the approach. Every way he looked at it, Humphrey Geller would have made the better advocate. Asano's characteristically idiosyncratic conduct bore that out. The absurdity of questioning Neil's elven heritage. Asano's description of his own team that was anything but appealing. Then there was Asano spending most of his time explaining not why Neil would want to join with them but why they wanted him to join.

Although Neil didn't understand it, there was no question that Asano was good at impressing important people. People themselves deserving of respect. The Gellers, the gold-ranked Emir Bahadir, the Vitesse adventurers. Even his enemies were impressive. He was already moving in vaunted circles, to the point that even when he drew hatred, it was from people so far above him they shouldn't care. There were rumours of Asano feuding with the directors of both the Magic and Adventure Societies. If true, that was madness for an iron ranker. Then there was whatever had made Cassandra look at him above all the numerous men in Greenstone vying for her attention.

The character of Asano aside, critical when choosing a team was the team's strength as adventurers. Neil knew almost nothing about the two others but Asano had told him didn't sound promising. Humphrey, on the other hand, was known to be one of the most proficient iron-rankers in the city.

As for Asano, at least as an adventurer he seemed capable. Thadwick's fixation had given Neil a fairly good idea of Asano's record. He had closed out a startling number of contracts in a handful of months, each punctuated with adventure board notices. In all of them, he didn't have a single listed failure. Asano had risen through the ranks fast and fallen even faster, but there were plenty of demotions going around.

He had seen multiple recordings of Asano fighting. Everyone had seen the one from the Geller's mirage chamber with Asano's overwrought theatrics. Neil had seen others where Asano had been fighting for real, his melodrama was replaced with brutal efficiency.

Thadwick had been furious after hearing about Asano spending time with Cassandra and, in typically reactionary fashion, sent a handful of goons to beat Asano down. After what Asano did to the first one, the others not only gave up but gave Asano directions to where he was going. Neil had only heard about it after the fact or he would have had Thadwick's father put a stop to it. Thadwick stupidly had his goons record the whole debacle, with his father tasking Neil with retrieving them all.

The strongest of Thadwick's bottom feeders was Jerrick, who Thadwick had playing muscle in his ill-considered land-grab scheme. Neil had been in the room as Thadwick's father tore strips off him for the plan's spectacular failure as the recording of Asano gathering evidence played. It ended with Asano fighting Jerrick.

Thadwick's father had taken the time to point out that Asano wasn't even fighting at his best. Against an armoured enemy, Asano should have kept hidden and used his leech familiar to crawl into the armour. Instead, he fought out in the open, suffering more damage than necessary. Asano was using a life and death battle with Thadwick's strongest thug as training.

The final recording Neil had seen of Asano was when twelve men confronted him. Four were the thugs Asano had run off in a previous recording, plus double that number of extras. A dozen admittedly mediocre adventurers, yet Asano made the twelve on one fight seem lopsided, in his favour. Five adventurers killed in a shopping arcade in broad daylight, the only repercussion being that it possibly contributed to his later demotion.

It was well-known that Asano had faced a bronze-rank marsh hydra with Humphrey Geller and some other guy no one had heard of. Everyone said that Humphrey had carried them through, including Asano himself, but Neil had come away from his conversation with Asano less certain of that. He knew Beth Cavendish thought highly of Jason's abilities and her judgement was razor-sharp.

As those thoughts chased themselves around his head, Neil arrived at the Mercer family home for the first time since the expedition. In the aftermath of that disaster,

Thadwick had been isolated by the family, then disbanded their team without notice. He had considered confronting Thadwick until he talked with their other team member, Dustin. In the end, they were just happy to be free with what was left of their reputations after being known as Thadwick's flunkies.

Neil approached one of the five gates that were the primary entrances to the Mercer family grounds.

"Neil Davone," the iron-rank guard said from the other side of the gate as he spotted Neil's approach. The Mercer family guards had long known Neil but the usual respect was nowhere on this guard's face. It was clear that in his eyes, Neil had lost his status as a valued ally of the Mercers. Now he was just another iron-ranker, like the guard himself.

"I'd like to see Cassandra Mercer," Neil told him.

"I bet you would," the guard said insolently.

"Excuse me?"

"I'm not going to interrupt her for the likes of you."

"Are you being serious, right now?"

"Move on, Davone. You don't get a seat at the big table anymore."

"Yes, he does," Thalia Mercer said, teleporting next to the guard. "Hello, Neil."

"Lady Mercer," Neil greeted respectfully.

"First, let me correct this man who used to work for us and tell you that you are always welcome here. Your family is important to us and you have always given my son loyalty he sadly never earned. What brings you by?"

"I wanted to ask your daughter about Jason Asano."

"Why?"

"He invited me to join his team. I'll probably decline but I found him odd to talk to. I wanted to know more."

Thalia touched the gate, which slid soundlessly to the side.

"I see. If you don't mind, Jason is a topic I would rather you not engage my daughter in. She's unhappy with the family right now and I don't want to exacerbate that feeling."

"Of course," Neil said. "My apologies for taking your time, Lady Mercer. I'll go."

"Please don't," she said. "Perhaps you can spare me a moment, instead."

"Of course, Lady Mercer."

She turned on the guard who had been hovering silently throughout the conversation.

"You, get to the security station and have them send a replacement. If I can assuage your offence to master Davone, there may be a chance of you maintaining your employment."

The guard nodded and scurried away.

“That’s not necessary, Lady Mercer,” Neil said.

“Nonsense,” she said. “Please come through.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Neil walked through the gate, which she closed behind him.

“Would you care to take morning tea with me?”

“I wouldn’t presume, Lady Mercer.”

“Nonsense, please do.”

“Then thank you, Lady Mercer.”

It did not go unnoticed by Neil that being led to a private social meeting with Thalia Mercer in the eyes of the whole household made a pointed statement about his status. She led him to the blue parlour, one of the various receiving parlours of the Mercer household. Each was named for the primary colour of its decoration, with the blue parlour awash in oceanic shades. It was one of the smaller parlours, for intimate and respected guests. Shortly after their arrival, a maid delivered tea and small savouries before departing. Thalia poured a cup for each of them.

“I know that your family’s tea standards are very high,” she said. “I hope you don’t look down on us too much.”

“Never,” Neil said.

“Such a good young man, you’ve become. So, you are considering joining Jason Asano and Humphrey Geller’s team?”

“Not really,” Neil said. “It’s just that some things about the way he made the approach have left me confused.”

“Perhaps I can help you with answers. When my daughter became interested in Asano I looked into him as deeply as I think anyone has.”

“Oh?”

“He was rather rude, the last time we met, which I am quite happy with.”

“Happy?”

“If he was unaffected by being severed from my daughter, I would have been quite dissatisfied. He is startlingly good for his rank at keeping his emotions out of his aura, but he was rather a mess. The anger of youthful passion meant his feelings were genuine. That’s always a concern when it comes to aristocratic relationships. Is there some young thing you are pursuing, Neil?”

“No, Lady Mercer. My attention is on my future as an adventurer.”

“Yes, you’re pondering Jason’s offer. I know he seems erratic but you’ll find that there is method to his madness. He has a way of leaving people thinking exactly what he wants them to.”

“How so?” Neil asked.

“You said yourself you will probably turn him down. Yet here you are, asking questions. Why?”

“There were oddities in the way he tried to recruit me. It’s like he was hiding reasons to join and giving me ones not to.”

Thalia smiled.

“There you are. Humphrey Geller aside, his team is not enticing at a glance and he knew an ordinary invitation wouldn’t work. Otherwise, he would have sent Humphrey. Instead, he found a way to pique your interest. He saw a path that led to you joining his team, and he put you on it.”

“You’re saying he manipulated me and I should refuse the offer?”

“I’m saying he manipulated you and you should accept the offer. Some, within these walls, will tell you that Jason is unreliable. He’s not. When it’s time to work, he gets the job done. My original intention was to place him and Humphrey with Cassandra, once they reached bronze-rank. That is no longer an option, but if I were in your position, I’d join his team in a heartbeat.”

“That’s not what I would have expected from you,” Neil said.

“Most adventurers in this city never leave it, and nor should they. They’re mediocre, without the potential to thrive in a dangerous world. What they lack in themselves, they fail to recognise in others. Anyone can see Beth Cavendish or Humphrey Geller will go places, but only those of us who’ve seen the wider world recognise the potential in someone like Asano, and someone like you.”

“Me?”

“You have what it takes,” she said. “People couldn’t see that with you chained to my son. I’ve been selfish in binding you to him because that helped keep my son alive. You have my apologies, for that, but not my regret.”

“You have no need to apologise, Lady Mercer.”

“You’re a good boy, Neil, but don’t lie to my face.”

She chuckled at Neil’s nervous expression.

“It’s an interesting team that Jason and Humphrey have put together,” she said. “I’ve just recently met another of their team members, who is an interesting young man from the Magic Society. He’s capable enough that Emir Bahadir is trying to poach him.”

“Asano told me that was for non-combat skills,” Neil said.

“And so it is,” Danielle said, “but why did he tell you that? He wanted you curious so that you would learn for yourself that the man is quite capable. Which he is, by the way. Danielle Geller is keeping a close eye on the team her precious boy is forming and can be trusted to excise any rot. And now you have heard it from me, you will trust it more than if Jason told you the man was good.”

“What about Asano’s indentured servant?” Neil asked.

“I’m not sure,” Thalia said. “Danielle told me she is reserving judgement for the moment. I will say that running rings around the city’s iron rank adventurers for months speaks to a certain capability, regardless of what help she received. Now she has a full set of essences, who knows what she’ll accomplish?”

“You seem quite certain I should join,” Neil said.

“You should be in a team that will help you fly, instead of chaining you to the ground the way I did. My advice is that you drink your tea, leave here and go straight to the Geller townhouse. Tell Danielle Geller you want to join her son’s team.”

“Not Asano or Humphrey?” Neil asked.

“They might think they have the final word on their team members,” Thalia said. “It’s probably best to let them.”

Chapter 141: Weaponising a Barbecue

Jason met Neil at the entrance to the cloud palace, along with one of Emir's staff who added Neil's aura signature to the access list for the palace.

"There are some restricted areas," Jason explained as they entered. "You shouldn't bump into any of those except the guest suites, which are individually locked to guests who can provide you entry or not."

Neil didn't say much looking around, wide-eyed as Jason led him to the guest wing. He was nervous, second-guessing his choice of team, but Jason was welcoming and friendly. He also seemed at home in the astounding surrounds of the cloud palace.

"We're going to start with a little welcoming lunch," Jason said. "You can meet the team and some of the people around it. After that we're going to spend the afternoon on a preliminary strategy session, looking at everyone's abilities and working on tactical concepts around them. From here on out, that's going to be our everyday; develop tactics, workshop them in the training room, then test them in the field."

"You're getting ready for the event Bahadir is planning?" Neil asked.

"You heard about that?" Jason asked.

"Word has gotten around."

"Certainly, being prepared for that is a good idea," Jason said. "Our sights are set past that, though. We're looking at the path to bronze and beyond. We want to establish a playbook of strategies and tactics that we know so well as a team that we're ready to go at any moment. As our abilities grow we can adapt and refine our repertoire, but the first step is working together, everyone knowing their potential roles. I hope you're not afraid of hard work and training."

"To be honest, Asano, you always struck me as more frivolous than hard-working."

"I'm a work-hard, play hard kind of bloke," Jason said. "Talking doesn't mean much, though. You can judge for yourself."

Jason led Neil onto an elevating platform that lifted them to the upper reaches of the cloud palace, before heading out to a terrace crowded with people, tables of food and a pair or large flame grills. Amongst the crowd were people Neil recognised. Rufus Remore was chatting with Vincent Trenslow and his absurd moustache; Humphrey Geller was flipping meat on one of the grills. Danielle Geller was chatting with Emir Bahadir, both holding grilled meat and vegetable sticks. He even spotted his friend and previous teammate, Dustin biting into a steak sandwich. Dustin's cousin, Hudson, was next to him

and they were surrounded by their respective teams. Dustin was on a Geller team now, looking more relaxed than Neil had seen him in a long time.

“What’s all this?” Neil asked.

“If you’re going to chuck a barbie,” Jason said, “you get some mates around. Let’s grab some tucker and I’ll make some introductions.”

The barbecue lunch went on into the afternoon, leaving Neil disoriented from a heady mix of grilled meats, quality alcohol and the kind of political connections his family only dreamed of. It was a social event wholly unlike those he had experienced in the Mercers’ orbit.

Everything was casual and the people present genuinely seemed to like each other. There was no carefully orchestrated social sniping, no playing one family against another. There was no stratification of rank, with bronze, silver and even gold-rankers happily chatting with iron. Instead of dainty, delicate finger food, people had meat piled into plates, skewered onto sticks or shoved between slabs of bread. There were tables of side dishes heaped into enormous bowls for anyone to grab by the tong-full.

Neil could hear the voice of his mother telling him to be mercenary, ditch Asano and seize the opportunity and forge connections. The voice seemed at a loss as Jason led him around, making introductions with no prompting on his part. People asked him questions, seeming actually interested instead of just digging for some useful titbit they could use.

“How long have you been in Greenstone,” Neil asked Jason between conversations.

“About five months.”

“How did you make these kinds of political allies in five months?”

“I didn’t,” Jason said. “I made friends.”

Jason found Humphrey away from the group, looking unhappy as he started out over the ocean. Jason joined him in leaning on the rail.

“What’s got you down, mate?”

“It’s Gabrielle,” Humphrey said. “Things aren’t going to work out with her.”

“That sucks,” Jason said. “Sorry to hear it. I’m guessing I wasn’t helpful in that regard.”

“It’s more than just that,” Humphrey said. “I would never ask her to choose between me and her religion, but she’s becoming more and more dogmatic. She’s becoming honest to the point of rudeness; demanding secrets she has no right to.”

“Well, I do the rude honesty thing too,” Jason said. “But in my defence, I also lie a lot.”

Humphrey laughed, then sighed.

“She’s started telling me who I shouldn’t spend my time with,” he said. “It’s why she’s not here. She really doesn’t like you and Rufus but that’s just the start of it. The strictures of her god are all well and good, but I’m not a follower of Knowledge. She has no right to hold me to those principles.”

“I’m sorry,” Jason said. “I’m at least a bit responsible for nudging you in her direction.”

“I’m not sorry,” Humphrey said. “I care for Gabrielle and I’ve enjoyed our time together. That time is just coming to an end.”

“Wow,” Jason said. “That’s super-mature of you. I was a couple of years older than you when my first big relationship ended and I blew up my whole life over it, like an idiot.”

“I’m going to tell her tomorrow,” Humphrey said. “She probably already knows.”

“Because of her boss,” Jason realised. “Damn, that must have been really annoying, having the goddess telling her everything.”

“It wasn’t my favourite thing,” Humphrey acknowledged. He turned to look over at the gathering. “How’s Neil fitting in?”

“A bit shell-shocked. You think it was the right thing, bringing out the big social guns? I don’t like weaponising a barbecue.”

“His family have been second-tier nobility for generations and this will get his family’s support. As for Neil himself, that’s up to you and me.”

As things wound down, Jason and Emir sent people off, usually with food in bags with a cheap, short-lived enchantment to keep the food inside them fresh and hot. Afterwards, Jason gathered their team together. Neil had now met the others; the lanky Clive Standish and the startlingly beautiful Sophie Wexler. Neil hadn’t been sure what to expect from Jason’s indentured servant, but the woman with silver hair, dark skin and sharp, wary eyes certainly wasn’t it. She was the one he had been the most uncertain about, but watching her sleek liveness made him a lot more confident.

They went off to Jason’s suite in the guest wing. Amongst all the cloud furniture, a trio of wooden bookcases stood out, jammed-full of leather-bound tomes. Even more books were stacked up on a table next to a reading chair, one of which Clive picked up to examine.

“This is some heavy theory,” he said to Jason. “You’re finally taking my advice?”

“This was Farrah’s collection,” Jason said sadly, gesturing at the bookcases. “She was like you, telling me to not just rely on skill books. With these, it’s almost like she’s still teaching me.”

“Farrah was one of the Vitesse adventurers,” Humphrey quietly mentioned to Neil. “She fell during the expedition.”

They sat down and Jason took out a notebook. Recorded in it were the abilities of everyone in the party, to which they added Neil’s. His essence combination was shield, growth and renewal, producing the prosperity confluence. Along with healing and cleansing powers, Neil could create short-lived shields that intercepted attacks, empower allies and replenish their mana and stamina.

“That’s an awesome power set,” Jason said as he wrote them down. “Not great if you get caught alone, but any team you’re on should celebrate. Which is our team, I guess, so... cheers, mate!”

As his powers were most effective when used on allies, Neil was highly reliant on his summoning power when fighting alone. It was not a summoned familiar but a temporary summons, like Gary’s forge golem or Farrah’s magma elemental. It would only last for a limited time, but he could afford to risk it in ways that he couldn’t with a familiar.

His summon was an entity called a chrysalis golem. It was a crystalline construct monster, it could create a protective shell around itself when it was badly damaged. When it emerged, it was fully repaired and adapted to resist the attacks that had previously harmed it.

“I can’t wait to get a look at that thing,” Jason said. “With Humphrey’s summons that makes two, excluding the summoned familiars Clive and myself have. We should be able to do some interesting things with them.”

Humphrey took the lead in discussions as they started devising potential strategies.

“The most fundamental thing is that we each need to have a sound grasp of each other’s abilities,” he said. “Neil, this is especially true for you, whose abilities rely heavily on judgement and timing. You’ll learn as we train, of course, but you should have at least a general idea of what each of us does before we start digging into specific tactics.

“Let’s start with Humphrey, then,” Jason said. “His essences are might, magic, wing and dragon. He moves faster, hits harder and withstands more damage than most adventurers. His attacks are mostly conventional melee powers, but they’re reliable and land like a truck.”

“What’s a truck?” Neil asked. “Is that some kind of monster?”

“It’s a big, heavy, fast thing,” Jason said grouchy. “It’s not my fault your stupid world doesn’t have internal combustion.”

“Lots of people have internal combustion,” Clive said. “Mostly from the fire essence, which is why it’s common.”

Jason groaned at Clive while Humphrey picked up the explanations.

“Clive has the magic, rune, balance and karmic essences. Unlike most humans, his focus is on spells. He can use magical weapons like staves and wands and works with his familiar to output reliable ranged damage. He also has some utility powers, trap magic and the ability to make our enemies suffer retributive damage from attacking us.”

“He also has some big-ticket attacks, if he goes all out,” Jason added. “If we need a single, big hit, he’s our guy. Those hefty spells need some setup, though, so we’ve already started devising strategies around them.”

“Miss Wexler is an evasion-type defender,” Humphrey said. “Swift, wind, balance and mystic. She is the newest of us, with many abilities still to awaken, but she is already the fastest and hardest to harm out of all of us. I have no doubt she will become increasingly formidable.”

“Asano is the sneaky prick of the team,” Sophie said. “His essences are dark, blood, sin and doom.”

“Sin and doom?” Neil asked. “They sounds like they should be on the restricted list.”

“They’re not,” Jason said. “We checked.”

“Jason is an affliction specialist,” Humphrey said. “Once he goes to work, whatever he’s fighting is finished, even if it seems to have gotten away. He’s also a good scout, with stealth and mobility.”

“Obviously, we don’t expect you to remember all this,” Humphrey said. “You’ll have plenty of time to learn, because that’s what we do, now. We get up, we meet up, then we train. Physical and mobility training we do in Old City.”

“When Jory renovated his clinic,” Jason said, “he turned his yard into a dedicated training space. So, thanks for helping stop it from being knocked down.”

“That wasn’t really me,” Neil said.

“Of course it was,” Jason said. “If you didn’t stand up to them and force the confrontation, the Healer might have waited until they tore down the place and then smote them all as sinners.”

“We’ll be alternating our time between developing strategies, refining them in practice areas or testing them in the field,” Humphrey said.

“The practise areas being the training hall, here in the cloud palace, or in Humphrey’s mirage chamber.”

“It’s not my mirage chamber,” Humphrey said.

“Other than that, it’ll be contracts and adventure notices,” Jason said. “That is going to be our day, every day, until Emir’s mysterious contest. We’re going into it as strong as we can be.”

“Is that going to be a problem, Neil?” Humphrey asked. “We’re looking for someone willing to go at this hard, so if that isn’t you, tell us now.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Neil said. “I’ve been waiting for a team that takes adventuring seriously.”

He looked at Jason. “I wasn’t sure that was you.”

“You can judge for yourself,” Jason said. “Today, we’re all talk. We throw every idea at the wall and see what sticks. Tomorrow we start figuring out what’s practical and what’s some overwrought notion I got in my head because I forgot simplicity is king.”

They moved onto the discussion of specific strategies, under the direction of Humphrey.

“I think you’re overlooking what should be our core strategy,” Jason told Humphrey, early into the discussion.

“What’s that?” Humphrey asked.

“You,” Jason said. “You do more damage than most and can survive more damage than most. With Clive and Neil, we have two buffers, plus shields and healing. Neil can even top-off your mana. We load all of that up on you and let you go ham. Add in your mobility and you’ll be an absolute terror to whatever we’re fighting.”

Uncertainty crossed Humphrey’s face.

“Are you sure you want to rely that heavily on me?”

Jason shook his head. “Oh, Humphrey. Hands up who wants to rely on Humphrey as the core of the team.”

Sophie and Clive put up their hands with Jason, Neil raising his hand right after.

“It’s adorable that you’re modest enough that I have to tell you this Humphrey,” Jason said, “but everyone likes and trusts you.”

Humphrey looked around the group, embarrassed.

“Now,” Jason said. “If we take that as our core strategy, all our tactics should be smooth adaptations of that default. What do you reckon, Humphrey?”

“Well, there are a few points that we need to look at using that as a strategy. First would be identifying and distracting anyone or anything with the singular attack power to punch through the buffs and shields.”

“So, the other team’s Clive,” Sophie said.

“Exactly,” Humphrey said. “For other Clives, we want you and Jason to at least distract and interfere, or preferably put them down.”

“I’m not sure I love this ‘other Clive’ analogy,” Clive said.

“What about actual Clive and the new guy?” Sophie asked. “They aren’t as mobile as the rest of us, and if we’re using a mobile attacking strategy, they’ll be left exposed.”

“Yes,” Humphrey said. “They’ll make a tempting target, so instead of trying to cover it, we use it.”

“I like it,” Jason said. “We’ve already worked up strategies using Clive as bait, so develop them and make Neil the second juicy worm of the hook. Turn what seems like a weakness into a weapon.”

Clive and Neil shared a glance.

“I’m not sure I like this plan,” Clive said.

Chapter 142: This Town Ain't Big Enough

The mirage chamber had created a sprawl of ancient, desert ruins. It was a town, long since dead and dry. Built into a hillside, crumbling buildings clung to the steep slope or were dug right into the yellow desert rock. Tunnels and stairwells were alternately exposed or buried by the dilapidating power of time, forming a rat's nest of unsafe passages and hidden nooks. Of the handful of intact buildings, none had a neighbour in the same condition, the slope a mess of tumbled brick and stone, half-gone walls and debris-filled, hard earth streets. The air shimmered with heat as the unyielding sun beat down on the clay and stone remnants of the town. Through the steep ruins, three teams stalked one another. Hiding and moving, they risked precarious tunnels and rooftops as they sought to find prey without becoming someone else's.

"Keep an eye on the shadows," Rick Geller warned his team. "Asano is the strongest scout in here and we all know what he can do if we let him play his games."

"Oh, I have all kinds of games," Jason's voice echoed loudly through the ruins.

"He's doing it again," said Claire Adeah, the healer and one of two elf sisters on the team. "That guy is so annoying."

"He's just trying to get you riled up," her sister said from above. "He knows he can't try what he did last time, but he'll still try and mess up your thinking."

Scouting from a rooftop, Hannah Adeah was an archer, the team's only remaining ranged specialist. The expedition and its aftermath claimed both Jonah and Henry Geller, their front-line guardian and magic ranged attacker. Their new members were Dustin Kettering, a local who filled Jonah's defender role, and Rick's sister, Phoebe.

Dustin's cousin, Hudson, was his counterpart on Beth Cavendish's team and currently an enemy. Dustin was a classic defender, not very mobile but very hard to go around or through. This put him very much in the role of the team member he replaced, unlike Phoebe. Instead of a ranged magic attacker, she was a fast melee attacker using unarmed combat. This forced a change in general strategy for the team, who had previously bunkered around their twin ranged attackers. Phoebe's presence failed to replicate their previous strength but broadened their abilities. In the weeks since gaining their new members, the team had been working on strategies that were less specialised and more adaptive and versatile.

Hannah stepped off the roof, dropping down lightly to rejoin the others.

“He isn’t as much of a threat in this environment as he was when we had to chase him through those mangroves,” Hannah said. “Did you hear how loud he called out? He’s trying to draw the other team to our location.”

In another part of the ruined town, Beth Cavendish and her team moved with the same caution as Rick's team did. Beth was widely known as both team leader and team healer, but it was her dangerous mix of wide-area afflictions and control powers that made her a true threat.

Their own archer, Emily, was likewise scouting from a rooftop vantage, but the steep slope made that tricky. The team was slowly moving uphill in search of visual and tactical advantage. Emily was a celestine with fair skin and a gold pixie cut that matched her eyes. She wore a simple cap to keep the sun from reflecting off her hair and giving away her position.

Their team was only four, compared to five each for the others and they were being appropriately cautious. Emily moved carefully down from her hidden vantage, returning to the team.

“I have at least a direction from Asano calling out,” she said. “Obviously, he wants to lure us into the other team and clean up whoever’s left. Do we scout it out and wait, or avoid it completely?”

“Let them thin each other out,” Beth said. “Jason’s team has his voice communication ability, so they have more tactical flexibility. We stay hidden and keep going for the high ground. We wait for the others to clash and then move.”

“Isn’t that what everyone is going to do?” Niko asked. Niko Tomich was from the smoulder race, with dark skin and burning red eyes. Niko used fire and iron powers to deal heavy damage in melee or combine damage and control powers at mid-range, making him the team's most versatile striker.

“Jason’s team is going to be more active,” Beth said. “Their defender is mobility-based and short on powers, where Rick's team has Kettering and we have Hudson. We're both stronger than his group at suffering an attack, while Humphrey is as strong an initiator as you could ask for. They'll try and catch us at a bad moment and make the most of it.”

Hudson was a huge, comic book character of a man and the guardian of Beth's team. He wielded earth powers and, like Clive, had a racial gift evolution that moved his aptitude from special attacks to another ability type. In Hudson's case, it was conjuration, allowing him to conjure up stone weapons, shields, walls and other objects to protect his team.

As Beth predicted, the three teams were slow and careful as they moved about the ruined town. Jason's team made various attempts to bait one of their opponents into an ill-considered attack without success before regrouping to discuss the next move.

"Both teams are being extremely cautious," Humphrey said. "They aren't willing to risk extending themselves because they know they will do better defending from readiness. Everyone is waiting for an accident or a mistake that turns the tables, letting them swoop in and clean up the other teams."

"So what do we do?" Neil asked.

"Our best bet is to strike first," Sophie said. "For both of their teams, if we can overwhelm the key defender, it opens up the rest of the team to our attacks. We load up Humphrey with powers and use that to punch through their strongest front-liner and clean up the rest."

"Initiating a straight-up confrontation will cost us in the long run," Humphrey said. "Even if the other team doesn't arrive in time to pincer us against the group we're already fighting, they'll be fresh and we'll be hurt when they do turn up."

"Hunkering down fits the other teams better than it does us, though," Clive said. "Our core strategy is offensive, relying on mobility and power. We're better off pitting our strengths against their strengths than our weaknesses against their, uh, mediums."

"Their mediums?" Neil asked.

"Yes, their mediums," Clive said emphatically. "I said it and I'll stand by it."

Jason chuckled, shaking his head.

"You're right, Clive," he said. "These aren't teams we can beat with anything but our best. Humphrey had it right, too. If we want to catch them out of position, it has to be when they're moving to capitalise on a mistake."

"What are you suggesting?" Humphrey asked.

"I'm suggesting we make the mistake that they're both looking for. They're both waiting for someone else to get in a fight, so we'll get in one and we'll ambush them as they rush to swoop in. I found a good spot when I was roaming around, earlier. You're good for one of those illusion rituals you were telling me about, right Clive?"

"In field conditions?" Clive said. "If you don't want any old perception power to see through it, I can't do any better than a blank wall."

"That's fine," Jason said. "We just need them to think there's only one entrance, so we can slip out as they slip in."

"So, who will we be fighting?" Sophie asked.

"Each other, obviously," Jason said.

Emily tilted her head, listening.

“Did you hear that?”

Beth gestured for silence. Soon after they heard the noise of an explosive ability triggering.

“They found each other?” Hudson asked.

“It might be a ruse to flush us out,” Beth said. “Move slow and quiet; we wait to see if it keeps going.”

They moved forward at a cautious pace, Emily scouting the path to each new piece of cover before they took it. As they drew closer to the noise, they could hear a fight in full swing, with abilities going off and multiple weapons clashing.

“Alright,” Beth said. “Pick up the pace, but not too much. We want to get there once they’ve spent themselves on each other.”

They accelerated their way along the path, Emily scouting ahead again as they narrowed in on the continuing sounds of combat. As they drew closer, Emily gestured for them to stop. She came back and gathered with the rest, hidden beneath a crumbling wall. “The noise is coming from inside the hill,” Emily said. “There’s a collapsed building that exposed the tunnel access. I caught a glimpse of fighting inside, but didn’t push my luck.”

“Any other entrances?” Beth asked.

“I can’t rule it out, but not that I saw,” Emily said. “My guess would be one of the teams spotted the other going in and moved on them.”

“Alright,” Beth said. “We go with our standard, three-stage assault pattern. Control powers on any loose threats; be sure and call your targets. This means you, Niko. Then we blanket the fight with area attacks and mop up whoever’s still got fight in them. When you’re ready, Hudson.”

Hudson nodded as his body took on the colour of the desert stone, flesh transmuting into living rock. He then broke out of hiding, the rest of the team on his heels. They dashed up the slope to the shattered building and into the tunnel, balancing haste and care as they moved through the rubble. The tunnel was around a dozen metres long, beyond which it opened into darkness punctuated by flashes of magical light. They surged forward, catching glimpses of figures clashing. It looked like several normal-sized figures against one that dwarfed even Hudson.

“Wait!” Beth called out and they all stopped. “Plug the Hole!”

Reacting without question, Hudson held a hand out ahead of them and a slab of desert stone rose up to seal the end of the tunnel and close them off from the room.

“What is it?” Hudson asked afterwards.

“They were summons,” Beth said. “Back out, now.”

They started heading back down the tunnel when an arrow flew into the tunnel. It came in at an angle, striking the wall but not losing momentum as it ricocheted. Instead, the arrow duplicated, two arrows now zipping down the tunnel at different angles. They kept bouncing and multiplying as they zigzagged down the tunnel, the confines of the tunnel letting them bounce their way into a storm of arrows. Hudson acted quickly, placing another wall between them and the exit, boxing them in from both ends but shielding them from the arrow attack.

“That’s both my wall abilities,” Hudson said. “I won’t have them again for a while.”

“You did well,” Beth said and pointed to the newer wall. “That’s your shatter-stone wall, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then see if you can’t clear us a path with it. Break us out of here.”

Hudson walked from the front of his team to the back. The first wall he had created was the strongest; a simple wall conjuration power from his fortress essence called bulwark. The second power was called shatter—stone wall and could turn defence into offence. He snapped his fingers and the wall exploded away from him in a wave of sharp, stone shards, peppering Rick and Dustin who were on the other side.

The cousins were on opposing teams but filled similar roles. They were both huge, shielding their respective teams with the support of their elemental powers. Hudson had transformed himself into stone, while Dustin was clad in armour forged entirely of ice. Shards of the exploding wall had dug into it, without penetrating.

Standing next to Dustin, Rick also had hefty armour but without the complete coverage that Dustin enjoyed. He avoided most of the damage but still suffered some cuts and scrapes that he was ignoring. As the two teams spotted one another, Beth was already chanting a spell.

“Let venom drift on the breeze.”

She opened her mouth wide and flower petals started streaming out of it and up the tunnel. They were lotus petals, dark green, purple and black. They swept out of the tunnel on a wash of air, blowing past her teammates without incident yet adhering to the enemy team. Wherever they landed on flesh they swiftly dissolved into the skin.

Before the effects of the petals could be seen, Niko stepped forward and exhaled a cone of fire like a dragon. Between the mysterious petals and the roaring flame, the momentum of Rick’s team was completely halted.

“Hudson,” Beth called out and a moment later, a stone block rose up under their feet. It carried them along the tunnel like a raft in a quick current, the ground rippling like water as they passed. Hudson stood at the front, conjuring a huge stone shield as they barrelled out of the tunnel.

Where the stone block carried Beth’s team, the hard, dry earth became soft and unsteady. As they emerged from the tunnel, Rick and Dustin were forced back as the rippling ground left them with unsure footing.

From a hidden vantage, Jason’s team looked on. Humphrey tapped Clive on the shoulder just as the stone raft emerged from the tunnel and Clive snapped his fingers. The magic rune that appeared went unseen under the raft, but exploded upwards, nonetheless. The stone block absorbed most of the force but shattered into pieces, bursting upwards like a geyser.

Beth and Emily were sent flying by the power of the explosion, cut and bludgeoned by chunks of stone. Hudson and Niko had been held in place by their protective powers, their conditions reflecting the strength of those powers. Niko staggered, injured and disoriented while Hudson was entirely unharmed. He looked around, taking stock of Rick’s team.

Rick himself looked singed but was functionally uninjured, although he felt woozy from the poison petals that had found their way onto his exposed hands and face. Dustin was standing strong, as was his ice armour. It was pushing out the stone shards from the wall explosion and sealing over the cracks. There was some melting from the fire breath, but that was likewise recovering in short order.

Phoebe was unarmoured and had been right behind Rick and Dustin, ready to move down the tunnel before they were pushed back. She had moved to use Dustin as a shield from the fire breath but had been subjected to the bulk of the poison petals. She had already dashed backwards, holding a hand out, palm up. Droplets of black, purple and green liquid started falling upwards from her palm, collecting in a small orb floating over her hand.

As Phoebe was purging the poison from herself, the last members of her team were already going to work. The elf sisters had been well back, avoiding the area attacks. Claire was purging the poison from Rick with a spell as Hannah nocked an arrow to her bow. The arrowhead was glowing, the light rapidly increasing in intensity until it started strobing. Aiming it at Beth, still prone from the explosion.

Things were happening all at once as chaos ruled the battlefield. Phoebe gestured with her hand and the poison orb flew at Emily, the enemy archer who, like Beth, was still sprawled on the ground.

Hudson had seen Hannah readying the arrow and moved to get in its path before it was loosed but Dustin intercepted him. Rick and Niko moved on each other; Rick already holding a sword as a huge iron hammer appeared in Niko's hands. Niko started growing visibly larger and the crude hammer grew with him. Even the handle was made of dark iron, which started to glow with heat.

Hannah released the arrow at Beth, only for Hudson to appear in her place while she appeared where he had just been standing. The glowing arrow tore a chunk out of Hudson's torso, which crumbled off him in stony fragments. Dustin, suddenly finding Beth in front of him, conjured a hatchet of ice in each hand and started swinging.

Beth activated an ability she shared with Sophie called between the raindrops. She had obtained it through the water essence instead of the swift essence but it was functionally the same. Her spatial awareness and reflexes took a leap forward at the cost of rapidly consuming stamina and mana which was worth it to escape Dustin's attacks.

After throwing the poison orb, Phoebe was moving before it even struck. Emily held out a hand into which an arrow appeared, the tip glowing. As the poison orb struck her, she jabbed the arrow into the ground. There was a shock wave, launching Phoebe backwards and Emily herself into the air. She was unharmed by her own power, even using the momentum to flip backwards and land on her feet. She was immediately woozy, however, as the poison orb took effect.

From their vantage point, Jason's team watched the conflict unfold.

"Things are stabilising," Humphrey said. "It's time to join in, make things messy again. Everyone knows what to do."

The team nodded and Humphrey looked up, teleporting high into the sky.

Chapter 143: The Second-Best Iron Ranker

After the initial chaos, the two clashing teams were starting to get their bearings. This was the moment that winged death plunged out of the sky in the form of Humphrey Geller. Careening downwards with his dive bomb special attack, wings splayed out behind him, his powers were amplified by both Clive and Neil. A circle of magical runes floated around him and his sword glowed with light. He was twice his normal size, with an attendant increase in strength from Neil's giant's might spell.

Humphrey had a sword pointed down in a reverse, double-fisted grip. Hudson was still prone from his switch-teleport with Beth when Humphrey landed with literally earth-shattering force as his blade smashed into Hudson, smashing off chunks of his stone body. The blade of Humphrey's sword found the exact spot where Hudson had just been injured, imparting all the power of multiple buffs, the massive fall and two of Humphrey's special attacks combined.

Almost any iron-ranker would have died from that single blow alone, but Hudson was just any iron ranker. More than half of his torso and one arm were just gone, shattered into stone dust. He was still massively injured and lying prone as Humphrey stood up from the crouch he had landed in, still almost double his normal height from Neil's spell. He lifted up his sword and brought it down again. Hudson lifted his remaining arm and a stone shield appeared to intercept the attack.

The incredible impact of Humphrey's entry to the battlefield drew all eyes as the rest of his team started emerging, unnoticed. Clive had a large staff, from which he fired a bolt of magic at the elf sisters. Claire and Hannah were largely separated from the battle, leaving them free to heal and offer ranged support, respectively.

Neil also stepped out with Clive but didn't act, instead, making himself ready to intercede with his abilities at need. A third team member, Onslow the rune tortoise, was not a born ambusher and was sedately emerging from cover behind them.

The blast from Clive's staff crackled over Claire's shield, dissipating without any effect beyond drawing the attention of the two elves. The sisters failed to realise that this was the point as they turned to face Clive and Neil and away from their shadows, thrown onto the ground by the bright sun. With Jason's well-honed aura control, they failed to notice his dark figure rise up from Claire's own shadow.

Claire fired a blast from a wand as Hannah launched an arrow that caught fire in flight. Both Clive and Neil had the same mana shield power as Claire, the attacks striking

their invisible shields. Mana shield was a power that each of them gained from different essences but the effects were the same, negating attacks at the cost of mana.

The weaknesses were also the same, however, not impeding non-attacks, or attacks made from inside their sphere. It was a weakness that had cost Claire before, with Jason's leeches, and it was about to cost her again. Standing behind her, Jason slashed his hand on the razor in his wristband and reached inside Claire's shield.

Leeches spilled out over her, prompting startling shrieks that had her sister spinning around to see what happened. Jason pointed his arm at Hannah, who was likewise sprayed with leeches. Both sisters wore a coat of toothy leeches and Team Colin went to work.

Hudson's switch teleport had moved her out of the path of an arrow but placed her squarely in front of Dustin and his ice hatchets. Her between the raindrops power let her avoid his attack and escape his immediate reach but not his attack range. He started throwing ice spikes, forcing her to keep her attention on him and not the battlefield.

She had no time to assess her team's condition, let alone direct them as she was used to. From the moment Rick's team had boxed her in, through their breakaway being aborted by whatever had blown up Hudson's stone raft, she had been on the back foot.

Beth's archer, Emily, was likewise under pressure. She was staging a fighting retreat as she was pursued relentlessly by the swift and powerful Phoebe Geller. Affected by the poison orb Phoebe had used on her, Emily landed arrows on Phoebe but only inflicted minor injuries. Phoebe wasn't deterred, slowly but surely closing the gap.

In the meantime, Humphrey was still pounding away at Beth's front-liner, Hudson. Hudson was very much at his limits, scrambling on the ground and conjuring shield after shield for Humphrey to smash through. Despite his buffs, Humphrey was finding Hudson frustratingly difficult to finish off. His size buff had worn off, reducing Humphrey to normal proportions, but he didn't relent.

The last member of Beth's team was Niko, using his fire and iron powers to clash with Rick Geller. Niko's powers included a size buff he could use on himself, but the extra space he occupied was proving more of a detriment than the strength was an asset. Knee deep in mud, against a swarm of leeches, Rick wasn't much of a fighter, but this was open ground. With free footing and a large, singular enemy, Rick was a horror to engage in melee; an avatar of speed and power whose attacks were as potent as they were relentless.

Of the fourteen combatants on the field, none of them were bad, but Rick was the leader of his team for a reason. No one would accuse Niko of lacking as an adventurer,

but Rick simply outclassed him. He unleashed on Niko all the frustration of setback after setback his team had suffered, losing not just team members, but family. Rick was relentless and overpowering, his sword finding Niko again and again, leaving Niko stumbling back, rapidly accruing injuries.

Beth bought herself time by making use of Dustin's own power. One of her quick attack spells was called water cutter, which fired a beam of water hard and tight enough to cut through at least non-magical metal. In between ice spike, she fired it directly into Dustin's face. It didn't fully penetrate his icy helmet, but the water froze over the front of it from the cold of his armour, blinding him with an opaque sheet of ice.

Dustin wasn't worried as she smashed the ice away with a fist, knowing Beth lacked the powers to harm him in the brief moment he took to clear his vision. Attacking was not the reason she had bought that time, however, which she took to scan the battlefield.

She saw her team members scattered and on the back foot. They were about to be wiped out and she knew she had to intervene, chanting a spell as Dustin cleared off the obscuring ice. He threw an ice spike at her but she swayed out of its path and continued her incantation.

"Cool waters be the crucible of deliverance, bringing the deserving into the chrysalis of peace and rebirth."

Just as Dustin reached her, giant, magical lotus flowers appeared around Beth, Emily and Niko, completely enveloping them. Beth didn't complete her spell in time to save Hudson, who had finally been finished off by Humphrey. The people attacking the three now hidden away inside the lotuses found their attacks bouncing harmlessly off.

"They can't do anything from inside there but we can't hurt them either," Humphrey communicated through the group chat. "Go for Rick's team."

Jason's sneak attack had devastated the elf sisters, who were thrashing on the ground under piles of bloody leeches. Sophie, yet to make an appearance, suddenly launched a sneak attack at Phoebe who was at a loss in front of the lotus-shrouded Emily. She dodged the sneak attack, dancing away to create distance and the women squared off.

"You should have Asano work on your aura retraction," Phoebe said. "His is practically imperceptible, while yours just gave you away."

"Sneaking is really his area," Sophie said. "I'm more about the punching and you don't need an aura for that."

They clashed in a series of strikes before one of Phoebe's special attacks blasted them apart, both women landing nimbly.

"You made a mistake even coming for me," Phoebe said. "If you'd gone for Beth, she wouldn't have shielded her team."

"But then we'd have to fight both teams," Sophie said with a malevolent grin as Phoebe's eyes went wide with realisation.

"Humphrey knows Beth's abilities," she said. "He predicted what she'd do."

"Humphrey's a good guy and wouldn't say it," Sophie said, "but I think he's sick of being called the second-best iron-ranker."

Phoebe glanced around the battle. The elf sisters weren't coming back from their predicament but Rick and Dustin had regrouped to take on Humphrey. Jason stepped out of a nearby shadow.

"It's nice that you made a friend but you're meant to be fighting her," he told Sophie.

"I'm new at this," Sophie said. "I was waiting for a big strong man to save me."

"Is that right?" he asked.

"It is," Sophie said. "If you could go get Humphrey, that would be great."

"Well, that's just hurtful," Jason said.

"You know I'm still here, right?" Phoebe said.

"I suppose we should deal with you," Jason said.

"Oh, you're going to deal with me, are you?"

"That's the plan," Jason said. "Keep her busy would you, Wexler?"

Sophie launched into the attack before he finished talking, Phoebe deftly defending. Jason looked at Phoebe.

"Bleed for me."

Blood started running from Phoebe's eyes and nose as he cast another spell.

"Carry the mark of your transgressions."

Phoebe was distracted as a sigil seared itself onto her face, taking a fist to the ribs from Sophie.

"Your fate is to suffer."

"You have some nasty damn spells," Phoebe said, still clashing with Sophie. Suddenly she broke free and lunged at Jason. As she moved, she saw him throw something at the ground and she found herself shrouded in murky darkness. It wasn't full darkness as she could see shapes moving in the strange zone of shadows. She recognised the effect as one of his throwing darts and knew it only covered a small area. Making an immediate break for the outside, she felt a light slice on her arm as she emerged into the light.

Fully aware of what Jason's powers could do, Phoebe held her hand out to purge the toxins, the way she had earlier by gathering them into an orb. Sophie didn't give her the chance, forcing her to defend against a renewed series of attacks. In their initial clash, Phoebe had the advantage. Sophie had the edge in fighting technique, but Phoebe had more powers and more experience using them. The tables were turned as Phoebe needed to get away and cleanse herself before Jason's afflictions overwhelmed her. While Phoebe was stronger, though, Sophie's powers combined defence with blistering speed. She wouldn't be able to take down Sophie quickly or outpace her and escape.

While Sophie and Jason confronted Phoebe, Rick and Dustin regrouped as their opponents were both closed off in the lotuses. Instead, they took on Humphrey, fresh from finishing Hudson. All else being equal, Humphrey and Rick were a good match with quite similar combat styles. The addition of Dustin helped Rick but Humphrey had Clive, Neil and the finally emerged Onslow the rune tortoise to back him up.

Neil's ability to buff and heal was valuable, but not difficult to use. What had arrested the attention of Rufus Remore was Neil's shielding powers. The shield abilities that he could use on allies lasted only moments and would end after absorbing only a single attack. Without good judgement and timing, both could be easily wasted, leaving them unavailable until they came off cooldown again. The ability burst shield blasted away anyone nearby when the shield intercepted an attack. The other ability, absorbing shield, replenished the mana of the shielded person. The more damage that was prevented, the more mana was restored.

Using the voice chat, Neil offered to reapply the size-growth power but Humphrey refused, not making Niko's mistake. Clive refreshed his buffs, the rune circle that triggered effects when attacked and the damage-reflecting damage buff, mantle of retribution. Neil did refresh his other buff power, armour of renewal, which reduced damage taken and gave healing over time.

Humphrey clashed with Dustin and Rick. The two opponents should have been pressuring him but Humphrey had spent weeks discovering his limits under the protection of Clive and Neil. He left openings so he could make attacks, trusting Neil's shielding and healing, while letting Clive's retributive effects trigger. Clive offered ranged support, alternate staff blasts with using his own mana to recharge Onslow's shell powers.

The three on two was disadvantageous to Rick and Dustin, but they were holding on. They had also been training hard and Dustin used his ice powers to protect Rick and set up counters. Powerful attacks from Humphrey found his sword hitting a suddenly appearing ice wall that exploded into razor shards that slashed at him like knives. Blasts of

icy air knocked him away and slowed his reflexes with cold debuffs. Humphrey fainted against Rick to strike out at Dustin, only for Dustin to be replaced with an ice clone as he teleported a short distance away. The ice clone shattered under the attack, once again peppering Humphrey with ice razors.

It was not enough as Humphrey pushed them further and further onto the back foot, their attacks either shielded or healed by Neil's life bolt spell. It was clear that if nothing changed, they would inevitably lose out.

"Go for the healer," Rick barked and Dustin disengaged, Humphrey not trying to stop him. Dustin charged at Clive and Neil as Humphrey used Rick's distraction to catch him square in the chest with a kick, sending him staggering back. To Rick's surprise, instead of pushing the advantage, Humphrey looked up at the sky and he teleported away.

Clive looked up at Humphrey, more than a hundred metres in the air, then down at the charging Dustin. He smiled and chanted a spell.

"Exchange your fates."

Suddenly Humphrey was standing where Dustin had been charging Clive. Rick looked over in confusion, then up at the sky as a sound grew louder and louder. Dustin's scream came to an end at the same time his fall did.

Rick's team were effectively done. The sisters had succumbed to Colin while Phoebe was still alive but too debilitated to fight, leaving Rick as the only active combatant. Humphrey turned back to face him but Clive's vision power could see the magic of the lotus shells was about to end and warned the team.

Humphrey directed the team to quickly gather, which didn't take long. He was already close to the Clive and Neil, while Jason appeared from a nearby shadow. Sophie moved so fast it looked like she was skimming above the ground instead of running.

Inside her lotus shell, Beth had no idea what awaited her outside. She would have to rely on quick actions and quicker thinking when her spell dropped. Losing Hudson was a blow, but Niko and Emily would be fully healed, with refreshed mana and stamina. She hoped Humphrey and Rick's teams had taken the time to tear each other apart, which would allow her team to emerge and mop up.

The lotus shell dropped and her eyes fell immediately on Humphrey's team. They looked unharmed but they were gathered together in an easy clump. She cast a spell, eager to get it off before they reacted to the shells dropping and scattered.

"Steelcutter thorns, burst forth and make the land your own."

Thorny vines erupted from the hard earth, even splitting rock as they emerged, completely encapsulating Jason's team. Sharp thorns dug into them, even piercing

Humphrey's conjured dragon-scale armour. They didn't penetrate far, but they were all bound such that any movement would cause the thorns to dig into them. As soon as the thorns started growing, Beth was moving in their direction. Emily and Niko were likewise setting themselves up to launch attacks the moment the thorns no longer obscured Jason's team.

"Clive and Neil, go," Humphrey said through the voice chat.

Not needing to move to cast spells, Neil and Clive both started chanting lengthy incantations. It was enough time that Beth was able to rush to the edge of the thorns and chant her own spell. On completion, she opened her mouth, from which streamed a wave of green spores, flooded over the field of thorns.

They all started getting messages from Jason's interface power.

-
- Spell [Spore Cloud] has inflicted [Spore Toxin] on you.
 - You have resisted [Spore Cloud].
 - [Spore Cloud] does not take effect.
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
-

Stuck in the cloud, the messages kept repeating. Only Jason resisted all the spores, but Sophie's aura helped the others resist many of them. Jason used his Feast of Absolution on Clive and Neil to cleanse them as they chanted their spells.

Neil completed his and in the air above the thorns, and ornate water fountain appeared, floating in the air. It sprayed water down over the people in the thorn field, healing their wounds.

-
- Spell [Fountain of Life] is healing you over time.
-

Shortly after, Clive completed his spell. High in the sky, a magical light traced out the shape of a huge eye in red and gold light.

-
- You have entered a zone affected by the [Eye of Karma]. When you suffer damage, the originator of that damage will also suffer damage.
-

"NOW!" Humphrey yelled and the whole team started pushing themselves into the thorns. The floating fountain constantly healed them even as the thorns injured them. Beth shrieked as the retributive damage of five people being pierced all over their body tore her flesh to ribbons. When she died, the thorns withered, leaving the fountain to heal them of any remaining damage.

As the thorns withered, a hail of arrows fell from the sky and fire breath washed over them as Emily took the chance to strike. It was too little, too late, though, with the fountain still healing them. With their team outnumbering the survivors of both the others combined, the outcome was inevitable. Rick and Niko formed a temporary alliance but were overpowered by Humphrey, Sophie, Neil and Clive.

Jason, meanwhile, hounded Emily. Unlike with a normal pursuer, she never knew which shadow he would appear from and quickly realised running was pointless. Instead, she made herself ready to pepper him with arrows if he emerged. In the end, he baited her. When he appeared from the shadows she fired her strongest special attack while creating distance backing right into a waiting mass of leeches.

The control room of the mirage chamber had extra platforms installed to accommodate fourteen people. The participants all got up and stretched. Their real bodies had been lying comfortably, yet they all felt exhausted.

Beth moved over to Humphrey, shaking his hand.

“You completely anticipated me,” she told him. “It was a good win.”

“That’s the disadvantage of being the best adventurer in the city,” he told her, unable to hide his victorious smile. “Everyone’s paying attention to your abilities.”

“That was very good,” Danielle said, standing next to the control panel.

“I agree,” Emir said, standing next to her. “You will all have a good chance in my little contest.”

“When are you going to fill in some more details about that?” Jason asked.

“Only once your competition has arrived in the city,” Emir said. “That should be any day, now.”

Chapter 144:

Arrival

“You can begin, candidate Wexler,” Vincent said. Sophie nodded and stepped off the road and into the field of crops taller than she was.

“There were nine grass darters reported,” Vincent said to the other candidates. “While candidate Wexler chases them down, we will have time to discuss the remainder of the day’s notices. Those of you who have yet to demonstrate your aptitude to a satisfactory level should be looking to volunteer...”

He trailed off and looked to the crops, where Sophie emerged, struggling to carry four dead beetles, the size of small dogs. The group watched as she dumped them onto the road, each having a fist-sized hole in its carapace.

“According to the Magic Society listing,” Sophie said, “the shells of these things are pretty valuable. You said you knew harvesting rituals, right, Clay?”

“Uh, yes,” Clay said. “Were they already dead?”

“If they were already dead, they’d be rainbow smoke already,” Sophie said. “Just harvest this lot and we’ll go even split. I’ll go pick up some more.”

“How did you catch them so fast?” another candidate asked.

“I think these ones are duds,” Sophie said. “The Magic Society listing said they were fast, but these seemed a bit sluggish. Can’t hide their auras, either, so my perception power makes them easy to find.”

Sophie ducked back into the field.

“I wouldn’t put much stock in what candidate Wexler considers slow,” Vincent advised the other candidates. “Her perspective is somewhat skewed.”

At the marshalling yard, Jason and Belinda were part of the crowd waiting for the return of Sophie’s assessment group. It was the first Adventure Society intake since the expedition, the last one having been cancelled in the wake of that disaster and the incursion of the inquiry team. For this assessment, Vincent had been paired up with a member of that team who mostly watched in silence. It was also a smaller group than usual, with families suddenly more wary about placing their young people in the path of potential harm.

“She’ll pass, right?” Belinda asked nervously.

“She should,” Jason said. “Vincent won’t just give her an easy pass but she’s better than I was when I took my assessment.”

“She’s better than you are now,” Neil said. Their whole team was waiting for her in solidarity.

“I’ll have you know, people find me very scary,” Jason said.

“You’re wearing a pink shirt with tropical flower print,” Neil said.

“They could be poisonous flowers; you don’t know.”

“My concern is the member of the inquisition team they sent,” Humphrey said. “He’s meant to be assessing Vincent’s execution of the assessment, but he may just make them fail everyone as some kind of example.”

“They could have just sent Rufus for that,” Jason said. “He failed everyone when he ran the assessment.”

“He didn’t fail me,” Neil said.

“He did me,” Humphrey said.

“He failed me before it even started,” Jason said. “He wouldn’t let me go, told me not to bother because I was definitely going to fail.”

“Was he right?” Clive asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Jason said. “A few weeks earlier I was assistant manager at an office supply store.”

“A what store?” Belinda asked.

“Office supplies,” Jason said. “The Station-Eyrie, where we’re hawkish about your office supply needs.”

“Does this make sense to anyone?” Neil asked.

“We find it best to just let him go and not ask questions.”

“I am curious about his world, though,” Belinda said.

“There are a lot of differences,” Jason said. “More pamphlets, for example. You go to an accommodation and they’ll have a stand of pamphlets for local attractions. I haven’t seen that here.”

“Pamphlets,” Neil said flatly.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “Folded pieces of paper with information printed on them. Do you not have them here? Maybe I should start a business. I could be a pamphlet mogul.”

“Is it too late to change teams?” Neil asked. “Someone must be looking for a healer.”

A wagon rolled its way into the marshalling yard, Adventure Society candidates climbing out as it came to a stop. After a few words from Vincent they broke off to meet with their families, some looking confident, others morose. Vincent exchanged a brief chat with the inquiry official before following Sophie over to their group.

“How do you think you did?” Belinda asked, giving Sophie a greeting hug.

“You’ll have to ask this guy,” Sophie said, jabbing a thumb in Vincent’s direction.

“We’ll make our assessment reports today and final results go up tomorrow,” Vincent said. “I don’t think candidate Wexler has anything to be concerned about, though.”

“How was the inquiry official?” Humphrey asked.

“Tough but fair,” Vincent said. “He didn’t demand quite as high a standard as Rufus, but he certainly wasn’t going to tolerate the usual Greenstone standard.”

“So we can expect better adventurers from now on,” Clive said.

“For a while,” Vincent said. “How long it takes to fall back into old patterns, who knows. Adventure Society culture is set at the top and Elspeth Arella isn’t what I’d hoped she’d be.”

“My mother hates working with her,” Humphrey said. “She wasn’t happy Arella held onto her position, but this threat from the Builder pushes aside everything else for now.”

“Speaking of which,” Neil said, “did your mother say anything about Thadwick?”

“Not much,” Humphrey said. “After they caught him she watched the purging ritual herself. It seems to have extracted the star seed intact but Thadwick was fairly ravaged by the process. Last I heard, he hasn’t woken up from the healing, yet.”

“Thanks,” Neil said. “I hated being on his team but I’ve known him most of my life. He didn’t deserve that.”

“He tried to kill me that one time, so I kind of think he does,” Jason said. “The suffering part, at least; I’m glad he’s not dead.”

“To finish the job yourself?” Sophie posited.

“No,” Jason said. “Thalia Mercer knows her son’s a useless dimwit but she’d still kill me if I did. Then my friends would go after the Mercers and on and on. I’m going to do what I should have done when I first met the guy and let it go.”

“That’s a mature attitude,” Vincent said.

“I’m still going to make fun of him though,” Jason said. “A lot. That guy sucks.”

“That’s slightly less mature,” Vincent said, “but I’ll take it.”

Sophie vaulted over the gap between the Old City rooftops, sailing through the crisp morning air to land with delicacy and precision. The sun was only just peeking over the delta, beginning to banish the cold of night.

Gary was close behind Sophie, his leaps heavy and powerful compared to her light agility. Jason was a distant third, his cloak floating around him as it let him easily make the distance. On Jason’s heels was Humphrey, manifesting wings to cross the gap. Bringing

up the rear were Clive, Neil and Belinda, who balked at the jump, stopping at the edge of the roof.

“I can’t make that jump,” Neil said, breathing hard.

“Not with that attitude,” Gary called back.

“We don’t have movement powers,” Clive said. “I can only teleport other people.”

“Teleport me over, then,” Belinda said.

“Why should you get the teleport?” Neil asked. “You aren’t even an essence user, yet.”

“And I still have to do this awful training,” Belinda shot back. “That’s why I should get the teleport.”

“No one’s getting the teleport,” Clive said. He backed up, broke into a run and vaulted the gap, successfully reaching the other side.

“Why do I even need to do this?” Neil asked. “I don’t have any mobility powers.”

“Which makes it all the more important,” Humphrey said. “It means that if it comes down to it, the skills you’re developing now will be all you have to rely on. What happened to the man who was eager to train?”

“I want to train the things I’m good at.”

“That’s all well and good,” Gary said, “but it’s the things you aren’t good at that get you killed.”

Neil groaned, but moved for a run-up before barely clearing the gap.

“Not bad,” Gary said, thumping him heavily on the back.

That left only Belinda on the other rooftop, eyeing off the jump when an angry man climbed up from a window.

“Who’s jumping up and down on my roof, first thing in the bloody morning?”

The team looked at each other uncertainly, then Clive chanted a spell.

“Exchange your fates.”

Belinda and Neil switched position, bringing Belinda into the group and leaving Neil with the angry homeowner.

“LEG IT!” Jason yelled and they all started sprinting.

“Oh, come on,” Neil complained as he watched them go, then turned awkwardly to the man whose roof he was standing on.

“Well?” the man demanded.

“I’m with the Adventure Society,” Neil said.

“Is there a monster up here?” the man asked, casting a gaze around.

“Uh, no,” Neil admitted. “No, there isn’t.”

“Then get off my bloody roof!”

A crowd was gathered at a dock in the Old City port that had been completely cleared for the approaching ship.

“Why do you need me here for this?” Rufus asked. “I’m meant to be making final inspections of the annex site this morning before giving the go ahead to break ground.”

“You are still my contracted agent here,” Emir said. “That’s why you came here in the first place, which makes any other ventures of secondary concern.”

“Since when do you care about that?” Rufus asked.

“Since now,” Emir said. “Shut up and get ready to greet the people as they disembark.”

They had spotted the approaching ship from the cloud palace. Full of Emir’s recruited iron-rankers, it would normally have used the Adventure Society’s private dock, but that was currently claimed by the cloud palace. Instead, room had been made at the regular port.

“You realise you’ve thrown this whole port into chaos, right?” Rufus asked. “They weren’t expecting to have some gold-ranker come in and just claim a whole dock.”

“The entire point of being a gold-ranker is to have other people deal with all the mundane problems.”

“And here was me thinking it was to protect civilisation from monsters,” Rufus said. “That’s a life lesson, I guess.”

Rufus made his way through the gathering of Adventure Society officials, Emir’s staff, dockworkers, and adventurers, arriving dockside as the ship approached the dock. Rufus’ eyes went wide as he spotted a man on board with midnight skin and dark, curly hair tied back behind his head. The man spotted him to and launched off the boat, sailing through the air on a magical wind to land in front of Rufus.

“Hello, boy,” the man said.

“Hello Dad,” Rufus said. “What are you doing here?”

Chapter 145

Full Jason

As the boat was still moving into the dock, the aeronautical early arrival of Gabriel Remore drew quite a lot of attention. The curious crowd pressed in for only a moment, though, before he pressured them back with his gold-rank aura.

“I see you haven’t been working on subtlety while I’ve been away,” Rufus said.

“Gods, you sound like your mother. She told me I shouldn’t fly over.”

“She’s here, too?” Rufus asked, gaze moving from his father to the approaching ship.

“Oh, now you show some emotional investment,” Gabriel said.

“Maybe if you didn’t make everything about yourself,” Rufus said. “Flying over here in front of all these people. What were you thinking.”

“That I could comfort my precious son.”

“Then why didn’t you bring Mother?”

The mirth dropped off Gabriel’s face as he turned to look at the ship.

“She’s with the Hurins,” he said.

Rufus’ face was stricken.

“Farrah’s parents?” he asked feebly.

“They wanted to come.”

Rufus reeled on the spot. “I shouldn’t have... I should have brought her home straight away.”

“It’s alright,” Gabriel said, placing a comforting hand on his son’s shoulder. “I won’t say it wasn’t hard on them, because how could it not be. But those of us with adventurer children know that adventurers don’t always come home.”

“I was supposed to protect her.”

“You were supposed to lead her, and you did.”

Gabriel looked around at the gathered people watching them. He had already used his wind abilities to make their conversation private, but there was no shortage of onlookers.

“You’re right,” he said to his son. “I shouldn’t have jumped over like that.”

Rufus was bleary-eyed but gave his father a smile.

“If you didn’t make a spectacle of yourself, I’d suspect you of being some kind of shape-shifter.”

“That’s kind of hurtful.”

“You did an unscheduled fire-sword dance at my academy graduation,” Rufus said.

Gabriel chuckled.

“Your grandad gave me an earful for that one.”

Emir passed through the wind bubble keeping in the sound and gave Gabriel a welcoming hug.

“How was the trip, Gabe?”

“It was good,” Gabriel said.

“You know I could have had Hester portal you in,” Emir said.

“Arabelle wanted to take the long way,” Gabriel told him. “All those stops picking up the iron-rankers gave us the chance to see some new places. It was good for the Hurins.”

“With you, me and Arabelle here, you should have brought Cal, too,” Emir said. “Get the old team together for a reunion.”

“You know what he’s like,” Gabriel said. “If there’s no monsters worth fighting, he’s not interested. You couldn’t drag him into a low magic zone like this one.”

“He doesn’t change, does he?” Emir asked, glancing again at the boat. “They’ll be getting ready to disembark, soon. I’d best go greet all the tadpoles.”

Emir was in front of a gathered group of iron-rankers. Some sixty or so had been on the boat, with two more boats coming.

“Welcome to Greenstone,” Emir said. “My name is Emir Bahadir and I’d like thank you all personally for coming all this way in response to my contract. As to the specifics, there will be a large announcement meeting once all of the adventurers have arrived. In the meantime, I suggest you report your arrival to the local branch of the Adventure Society. I’ve arranged a number of carriages to take you all there directly, and they can help you find local accommodation.”

Adventurers didn’t have luggage, carrying their possessions in dimensional bags or dimensional space abilities. They were trained to travel light and with efficiency and were soon heading for the Island in a train of carriages. Not all of them took the offered ride, heading straight off to explore Old City or hanging around instead, hoping for some personal time with Emir.

Others were greeted by representatives of Greenstone’s nobility or other prominent families. Every other family in Greenstone envied the power and influence the Gellers held in other lands and leapt at the chance to make outside connections. They hoped that playing host to the next generation of leaders would get them a foot in the door of a larger world. This was reinforced by the Geller family itself, so sent representatives to collect certain people to which they had connections.

Emir sent most of those looking to make an early connection away, except for a young girl of only fifteen years, with dark skin and rainbow-coloured hair that fell back over her head in a series of tight braids.

“Ketis,” Emir greeted her warmly.

“Grandfather,” she said with a respectful nod.

“No hug for grandad?”

She gave him a hug after glancing around with the self-consciousness of her age.

“How was your trip?” he asked.

“The boat was so small,” she complained, drawing a laugh from Emir.

“Of course it was small after the cloud ship,” he said. “It’s good for you to broaden your perspective.”

“You don’t broaden your perspective by narrowing the ship,” she said sullenly and Emir laughed again.

“Did you enjoy travelling with Aunty Arabelle?”

She nodded.

“Alright,” he said. “Come along as I say hello. I have a present for you, later.”

They wandered over to where Rufus and his father were talking with three other people. Rufus’ mother, Arabelle, had even darker skin than her husband, her long hair dyed rainbow colours in the Vitesse style. Farrah’s parents, the Hurins, were fair-skinned, like their daughter had been. Emir knew that while they looked older than the Remores, Amelia and William Hurin were actually younger.

Of humble origins, they had become adventurers later in life. As young parents, they had stumbled upon the valuable potent essence. Instead of selling it for its considerable value, they kept it hidden as they worked to obtain more. By the time their daughter was old enough to use them, they had the more common fire and earth essences to go with it. It was only after their daughter found success as adventurers that she repaid the gift twice over and they, too became essence users.

Farrah’s parents had no interest in following their daughter into the Adventure Society. They were both bronze rank, having raised their abilities using the monster cores Farrah brought back from her adventures. Rufus and Gary had likewise contributed their own shares.

As Emir approached, Rufus was bowed before them, practically kneeling.

“I’m so sorry,” he told them.

“Please stop apologising,” Farrah’s mother, Amelia said. “Our daughter died as an adventurer, and she died proudly. You’re no more to blame than we are for giving her those essences in the first place.”

“We had an informal wake a couple of weeks ago,” Rufus said. “Now you’re here, I’ll arrange something more formal.”

The two sets of parents shared a glance over Rufus’ bowed head.

“You do that,” Farrah’s father, William said. “We’d appreciate it, son.”

In the cloud palace training hall, Humphrey and Sophie were clashing while Jason, Neil, Clive and Belinda rested in the observation area. Humphrey had his smaller conjured sword out, Sophie deflecting it with her fists.

“When I get my own essences,” Belinda told Clive, “I think I’ll prefer to fight at range, like you. Getting up close like that is really more Sophie’s area.”

“That can be tricky for a human,” Neil said. “Humans get more special attacks than anything else, unless you get a racial gift evolution early, like Clive. Mostly that means melee attacks. If you want range, then a bow essence would be a good choice. That’s the most reliable way to get ranged special attacks.”

“Or you could get an ability that lets you use skill books,” Clive said. “That way, you can gain whatever skills you need. The adept essence is a solid bet, in that case.”

“I looked at the bow essence, but decided against it,” Belinda said. “Adept is on my list, though.”

“You’re already picking out essences?” Neil asked.

“Clive let me look at the Magic Society essence listings,” Belinda said. “I’ve picked out a set I like the look of. They’re all common essences, so they shouldn’t be that hard to get.”

“You’ve made a decision?” Clive said. “What combination?”

“Magic, adept and trap,” she said.

“Magic and adept are popular essences, but not hard to find,” Clive said. “Trap is more of a niche selection. Mostly assassin and hunter types go for it; I think it’s an undervalued essence when it comes to monster hunting.”

“What’s the confluence essence for that?” Neil asked.

“Charlatan,” Belinda said with glee. “I was looking through the abilities it’s known to give and they sound fantastic.”

Neil and Clive shared a glance.

“Charlatan?” Neil asked.

“From recollection,” Clive said, “it’s a confluence more people avoid than seek out. Most would disagree with you on the value of the abilities it gives.”

“Then those people lack imagination,” Belinda said. “I looked through long lists of abilities. I don’t want to pick out some essences looking for fun, tricky abilities, only to end

up with a boring set of straightforward attacks. Ideally, I'd get one of those racial gift evolutions that means I'm not stuck shooting nine kinds of magic arrow."

"We fought a couple of people in the mirage chamber recently who might disagree," Neil said.

"Those people lost," Belinda said. "Maybe they would done better if they had more tricks in their pocket."

"Harsh," Jason said. "I have to agree with the value of having a few hidden surprises at the ready, though."

"As do I," Emir said as the elevating platform brought him up into the room. "Speaking of surprises, I believe you have something for me?"

Clive pushed himself out of the chair, took a heavy book from his storage space and handed it to Emir.

"Skill book. Way of the Reaper, form three."

"You aren't still holding out on me, are you?" Emir asked. "Jason told me you didn't take anything from that complex you found."

"I said no such thing," Jason said. "If you think back, you'll find I dodged the question. If I went telling high-rankers every time I found something interesting, they'd just keep taking them off me."

"Is that why you kept your and Miss Wexler's unusual combat style from me for so long?"

"I thought it was best if your interest in her was purely altruistic," Jason said. "It was her choice to tell you. She wanted to thank you for taking her in when you had no need to."

"My client is very interested in the origin of that fighting style," Emir said. "Once our business here is done, I suspect he will have an interest in tracing Miss Wexler's family history. Perhaps, once her indenture is done, she will be interested in that journey for herself."

"That's up to her," Jason said. "So, this granddaughter of yours has been learning the Way of the Reaper too?"

"My search has taken time and found many relics of the Order of the Reaper," Emir said. "That includes skill books. My granddaughter can use skill books and was very interested in practicing a lost style. I was reluctant, having only recovered books containing three of the five forms. In the end, she wore me down."

"Your client didn't want the books?" Clive asked.

"My client appreciates any relics I send his way and pays me appropriately, but I am only contracted for one item. We have found multiple copies of these skill books and had

some to spare, but only for three of the forms. We haven't found anything for the second or third."

"We found intact copies of forms one and three," Clive said. "We can't help you with a book for form two."

"I'm not so sure about that," Emir said. "My hope is that one will be recovered during the upcoming contest," Emir said. "I will share the details once the other boats arrive. Even if not, both you and Miss Wexler have knowledge of form two, do you not, Jason?"

"We do. We're grateful for all you've done for us, so we'd be happy to teach her what we can."

"That's excellent," Emir said. "You'll meet her soon. Have you met Rufus' parents, yet?"

"Not yet," Jason said. "Rufus and Gary have been with them and Farrah's parents since they arrived."

"Rufus had a request for you, for when you meet his father."

"Oh?" Jason asked.

"Rufus' father, Gabriel, likes to make a big first impression. He didn't tell Rufus he was coming, then made quite the entrance at the port."

"So I've heard," Jason said.

"Rufus requested that when you meet his father, you go what he referred to as 'full Jason,' whatever that means."

"Oh, we know what that means," Neil said.

"Yes, we do," Clive said.

"What are you two talking about?" Jason said.

"You questioned if I was even an elf, then accused me of being fat," Neil said.

"You claimed to have slept with my non-existent wife, then accused me of sleeping with your non-existent wife."

"Neil's an elf?" Belinda asked.

"Yes, I'm an elf!"

"You are quite hefty for an elf."

"My proportions are perfectly normal!"

"I see it now," Emir said. "This is exactly what Rufus was looking for."

"He had his landlady yell at me."

Chapter 146:

Versatile

Jason was sitting in a meditation pose on one of the cloud palace's open terraces when Rufus wandered along with his parents.

"This is Jason," Rufus said.

Jason turned his head and opened one eye to look before springing lightly to his feet.

"Gabriel and Arabelle Remore," Rufus said.

"So this is the Jason Asano I've heard so much about," Gabriel said.

"You have?" Jason asked, surprise clear on his face. "Most people only pay attention to the big names, you know? Staedtler, Moranse; the ones with all the fancy glazing techniques, the overdone vases that no one ever actually uses as a vase. I mean, seriously. If the form overwhelms the function, what's the point, am I right?"

"Glazing?" Gabriel asked in confusion.

"I know, right?" Jason asked. "The true enthusiast understands that it isn't about the flashy finish but the craftsmanship of the underlying product. Every aficionado who truly knows their business understands that the real collectible is also the most practical. They don't go for the weird oversized bowls or the fancy jugs with artistic flourishes that compromise volume. They know that solid, economical designs are what really endure."

"I'm sorry," Gabriel said, "but what are you talking about?"

"Pottery," Jason said. "That's why you heard about me, right? And I can tell you that the rumours are true: I have the best clay to coin ratio in Greenstone. You want practical, affordable earthenware, then I'm your guy."

"Pottery?"

"Oh yeah," Jason said enthusiastically. "I'm not just about the pots and bowls, either. You want the inside skinny on the industry, then I'm your man."

Jason narrowed his eyes, giving the Remore's an assessing look, then leaned in, conspiratorially.

"Because your Rufus' family," Jason said, "I might have a little inside tip for you."

"I think there may have been a mistake," Gabriel said.

"No mistake, my friend," Jason said, giving Gabriel a pat on the arm. "You want the inside scoop? The hidden truth the other earthenware merchants won't tell you? You can forget the vases, my friend. The bowls, pots, pitchers, planters and jugs. I know they're all the fancy, eye-catching stuff that the ordinary collectors go for. And those big-name

potters, they're more than happy to feed them the dross while keeping the real goods for themselves."

"What is happening?" Gabriel asked.

"The future is happening," Jason said. "Not just the future of pottery, as if that wasn't exciting enough, but the future of beverages themselves!"

"Beverages?"

"Oh, yes, my friend. I know it seems like everyone stores wine in bottles these days, but take it from an industry insider: amphorae are coming back in a big way."

"Amphorae?"

"That's the stuff," Jason said. "These aren't your grandmother's amphorae; they're not just for wine anymore. Milk, tea, juice, liquor, Bovril."

"Bovril?"

"Oh, I forgot you don't have cows, here. Lizard Bovril? Forget the Bovril, focus on the amphorae. I realise that every good collector has an amphora or two squirrelled away somewhere. They're always an addendum, though; a punctuation point in a piquant pottery poem, but I'm here to tell you, friend, that amphorae are about to explode onto the scene that will make vases look like little dishes people use for hard candy!"

"I really don't understand what's happening," Gabriel said.

"Of course you don't," Jason said, moving next to Gabriel and slipping a sympathetic arm over his shoulder. "Even as we speak, the potters of the world are hidden away, crafting amphora after amphora for the bonanza to come."

Gabriel pulled himself away from Jason, which did nothing to dampen Jason's enthusiasm.

"I've very clearly missed something in this situation," Gabriel said.

"Of course you have," Jason said, "but that isn't your fault. It's these so-called industry professionals, collection agents and gallery owners. They know the truth, but will they tell good, honest collectors like you? No, they won't. It's a conspiracy, my friend, an amphora conspiracy to keep you out of the game until the market explodes and they hold all the cards."

"I'm very confused," Gabriel said.

"Of course you are," Jason told him sympathetically. "Some poor, innocent pottery enthusiast can't be expected to understand the market nuances and industry secrets. That's surely why Rufus brought you to me, right?"

"Oh, I definitely brought him here for this," Rufus said.

"There you are," Jason said. "Clearly you're a gentleman of insight and means."

Jason leaned over to Rufus.

“He is a man of means, right?” Jason whispered.

“Oh, yes,” Rufus said and Jason gave Gabriel a beaming smile.

“Insight and means,” he said again. “A man who won’t miss an opportunity literally hidden away from the more ordinary collector. Let me paint you a picture. A workshop, filled with secretive but capable apprentices, all under the direction of an experienced and rakishly handsome man with almost months of experience. Rack after rack of amphorae. No bowls, no pots, no jugs. Just one amphora after another, poised for that market shift, ready to explode in prominence.”

“Are you trying to get me to give you money?” Gabriel asked.

“It’s not about money,” Jason said. “It’s about showing those with an iron grip on the industry that we can bust open their artificial scarcity! And also money. You drop seven or eight gold spirit coins now, and a few years down the track, you could very well have made some of it back!”

“Could?”

“Hold on, I have a pamphlet here somewhere.”

“Pamphlet?”

Jason patted his pockets absently, then his face lit up as he remembered and he plucked a pamphlet out of the air, shoving it into Gabriel’s hand. Gabriel looked warily at the cover.

“Step one, collect underpants?” he read.

“Oops,” Jason said, snatching back the pamphlet and shoving it back into his inventory. He then pulled out a fistful of pamphlets and started leafing through them, reading to himself as he went.

“Church of Om; not a lot of hope for that catching on. Shelving unit assembly. Wicker versus rattan furniture selection guide.”

He looked up at Gabriel. “Sorry mate, just a second.”

Jason resumed sorting through the pamphlets as Gabriel searched his still innocent-looking son’s face for any hint of explanation.

“Basic guide to yoghurt,” Jason continued. “Woven rug care in 5 easy steps; I’ve been looking for that one. Blue Oyster Bar, that one’s for Rufus. Oh, here we go; basic guide to amphora selection.”

Jason handed over the pamphlet as he shoved the rest back into his inventory.

“Note that the pictures show each amphora at the same size,” Jason said, pointing. “That’s just to make use of the space on the pamphlet, where obviously any given

amphora can come in any size. For clarity, you'll note that there's a standard reference pear in each picture."

Gabriel looked at Jason like he was some kind of madman.

"Reference pear?"

"That's industry standard," Jason said. "I thought you said you were a collector?"

"I am not a collector!"

"Then why did you say you were?" Jason asked, anger and confusion splashed across his face. "Are you just here trying to dig up industry secrets? I told you about my slave workshop!"

"Slave workshop?"

"Indentured servants, whatever. Oh, this is a shocking turn up."

"I thought you were an adventurer."

"Oh, it's always like that, isn't it?" Jason said. "You kill a few hundred monsters and suddenly all people see you as is an adventurer. Let me tell you, mate, adventuring is just a job. Pottery is a vocation."

Jason yanked the pamphlet from Gabriel's hand.

"Forget this," he said bitterly, stormed over to the terrace railing and vault over the side, dropping out of sight.

"So that was Jason," Rufus said mildly. "Next we'll head to the guest wing lounge and dining area, where I've had some lunch prepared."

"Dear," Gabriel said.

"Yes, my love?" Arabelle asked. She had remained silent throughout the encounter.

"What just happened?"

"We just met Rufus' friend, dear," she said. "Don't be judgemental."

"Judgemental? The man was a loon!"

"He's from very far away," Arabelle said. "He's bound to have some idiosyncrasies."

"Idiosyncrasies? He tried to get me to invest in a pottery workshop staffed by slaves! He wouldn't stop saying amphora and I still have no idea what Bovril is."

"I think it's a local delicacy where he comes from," Rufus said. "Don't worry about it, Dad. I have food waiting."

"Yes, do come along, dear," Arabelle said and set off with her son, Gabriel trailing after.

"You set this up," Gabriel accused Rufus. "This is for jumping off the ship in front of all those people, isn't it?"

"No idea what you're talking about, Dad."

"You actually made pamphlets?" Gary asked.

"Yep," Jason said. "Eight of them. There's a simple ritual to print images, so the real issue was finding the right card stock. For a good pamphlet, it has to be nice and thin, but firmer than just paper. Durable, with a good feel in the hand."

They were sat around a banquet table in the guest wing lounge and dining area. It was Jason's full team, plus Gary, Belinda, Jory, Phoebe, Emir and his chief of staff, Constance.

Emir was laughing as Rufus led in his parents.

"You!" Gabriel said, pointing at Jason, making Emir laugh all the harder.

"Sit down and eat, Gabe," Emir said. "Always a pleasure, Bella. You can sit next to me."

"Keep your hands off my wife," Gabriel said, sitting down.

"Connie, always a pleasure," Arabelle said, sitting next to Constance.

"Bella," Constance greeted. Emir's usually reserved chief of staff seemed a little more relaxed than normal. Only a little, but it stood out.

"Lovely to see you again," Jason said and made introductions around the table. When introducing Rufus' parents, he referred to Rufus' mother as an esteemed adventurer, venerated by kings and heroes. Gabriel, he referred to as some kind of teacher.

"I have a question," Gabriel said to Jason.

"Just one?"

"How much of what you were saying to me was a lie?"

"All of it," Jason said. "I was lying through my teeth. I'd probably mistake a kiln for a rustic barbecue and use it to cook sausages."

"I'm a gold ranker," Gabriel said. "I can see right through your aura."

"Rude, but okay," Jason said.

"Why couldn't I tell you were lying? I should have been in your aura."

"Oh, that's a technique from my world called the Stanislavski system," Jason said. "To grossly oversimplify, it's about becoming the person you're pretending to be in the moment."

"It's a formidable tool," Arabelle said.

"Especially when you run around making high-ranking enemies, the way Jason does," Gary said.

"What are you talking about," Jason said. "Everybody loves me."

“Speaking of which,” Emir said, “I was hoping you could help me with something, Jason.”

“Oh?” Jason asked.

“I thought I might take the opportunity of all these new adventurers arriving to try and bait out the Builder cultists and I had an idea that makes use of your flair for pompous melodrama.”

“Pompous melodrama?” Jason said, as laughter spread around the table at his hurt expression.

“That’s your problem?” Emir asked. “Not being used as bait for evil cultists?”

“No worries there, mate,” Jason said. “Evil cultists are kind of my thing.”

“Evil cultists are your thing?” Phoebe asked.

“Jason has a lot of things,” Gary said.

“I’m versatile,” Jason said.

Chapter 147: I Don't Like This Plan

The marshalling yard was full of adventurers, waiting for Emir Bahadir to arrive. The third and final boatload of iron-rankers had arrived the day before and a meeting had been called to finally explain the job. Along with all the imported adventurers, the locals were out in full force. After the expedition, only those confident in their abilities were going to participate, but iron, bronze or silver, everyone wanted to know what had brought Emir to Greenstone in the first place.

“Asano!”

The voice was loud and challenging, grabbing attention. Jason and his team were waiting with everyone else, looking up as someone called out Jason's name. Space was made as a young man strode through the crowd.

“Asano,” the man said again.

“Something I can help you with?” Jason asked.

“You have one of your own team members as a slave?” the man asked.

“Indentured servant,” Jason said. “Do you have a name, or should I just keep thinking about you as that loud guy who won't mind his own business?”

“Julian Cross,” the man said.

“Alright, Julian,” Jason said. “What exactly does my team or my indentured servant have to do with you?”

“Letting an adventurer be an indentured servant is a disgrace. Relinquish her.”

“That wouldn't set her free, idiot. It's a court-ordered indenture, so they'd just put her contract up for auction.”

“Then you should transfer her contract to someone who won't treat her like a slave.”

“Says the guy who's talking about her instead of to her, when she's standing right here.”

Jason half-turned his head in Sophie's direction.

“What do you think?” he asked. “You want this guy to have your contract?”

“I'm not against getting away from you,” she said. “I think I can do better than him, though.”

“Not true,” Julian said. “I wouldn't treat you like a slave. You'd receive far better treatment than he would ever give you.”

“The thing is,” Jason said, “neither of you actually get a say. You, Julian, aren’t involved at all, despite marching up and making a scene in front of all these people. As for you, woman, you belong to me.”

“Screw you,” Sophie said.

“If and when I say,” Jason said coldly.

“You think I’ll just stand here and let you treat an adventurer like that?” Julian asked. “I challenge you.”

“Challenge me?”

“To a duel. There is a mirage chamber in this city, so I’ve heard. If you win, I shall withdraw from this event and return to my homeland. If I win, then you transfer the contract over to me.”

“If you want to duel, mate, there won’t be any mirage chamber involved. You want to put something on the line, then it’s your blood. Do you have a first blood rule in duelling, here?”

“We do,” Julian said.

“Then we do it here and we do it now,” Jason said. “You and me. First blood.”

“Fine,” Julian said. “One blow is all I need to kill you, anyway.”

Space was quickly made, a circle of onlookers as the borders of their impromptu arena. Julian and Jason circled each other, around five metres apart. Julian had the lean, athletic physique of most adventurers, with sharp, predatory features, swarthy skin and a mane of amber hair. His hand rested lightly on the undrawn sword at his hip.

Jason was on the other side of the encircling adventurers, shrouded in his cloak. In his hand was his conjured dagger, *Ruin*. The pair of combatants eyed each other off, each waiting for the opening that would give them the win. They circled slowly, each careful with their footwork, ready to move at any moment. Julian was the first to act.

His sword erupted from its scabbard, a spark flashing from the blade and driving into Jason’s cloak. The cloak was already empty, Jason having left it behind as he used it to shadow teleport. He rose behind Julian from his shadow, reaching around to slash Julian’s throat.

As Jason casually tossed aside his conjured dagger, which vanished into thin air, Julian clutched a hand over his throat, blood seeping between his fingers. His other hand scrambled for a potion, which he tipped into his mouth.

“First blood,” Jason said. “You’d best have a healer look at that, mate. Your welcome for me not going deep, by the way.”

Julian pushed his way through the crowd, a hand still clutched over his throat. Jason turned around on the spot, casting a challenging gaze over everyone.

“Does anyone else have a problem with me?” he called out. “That one was a warning. There won’t be any more duels. You have a problem with me, either keep it to yourself or I will put you down. If any more people here have an issue with that, I can start right now.”

“That’s easy to say with Bahadir standing behind you,” someone called out from the crowd. “You think we don’t know you’ve been staying in the cloud palace? You can talk big all you like, but it’s not you that we’re afraid of.”

“Well said,” Emir’s voice boomed over the crowd from above. Everyone looked up to see Emir flying through the air, feet shrouded in a small patch of cloud. The cloud vanished and he dropped lightly to the ground, next to Jason.

“Jason,” Emir said, “if you want to challenge any and all who come your way then, by all means, do so. However, you must use your own strength to do so, not mine. I think it is time for my hospitality to come to an end before it starts to hinder your progress as an adventurer. The cloud palace is closed to you, now.”

“You can’t do that!” Jason exclaimed.

“I can and have. Your aura imprint will be wiped from the cloud palace’s access list. This is for your own good; relying on the strength of others with cause your own to atrophy.”

“You think I need you?” Jason asked. “You just wait. You’ll see what I can do on my own.”

“I genuinely look forward to it.”

Jason’s rage-filled face was obscured as his cloak formed around him once again. Then the cloak was empty as he teleported away, drifting down for a moment before vanishing. Emir let out a world-weary sigh, then turned to the crowd.

“I realise there will be tension between locals and the newcomers, so let me be plain. As many of you have surmised, Jason Asano is under my protection. I am extending that protection to every iron-ranker who signs on to the open contract I will be posting at the Adventure Society today, and that protection is the same for all, in both its extent and its limits. The protection is thus: every one of you must be fit for action when the contract begins in three days. I don’t care what you do to one another, so long as you can be healed and ready for action at that time. That goes for Asano and each and every one of you.”

The cloud appeared around Emir’s feet again and he floated into the air.

“Now that is dealt with, we move onto the nature of the contract. Centuries ago, there was an ancient order of assassins, known as the Order of the Reaper. They were hunted down and exterminated, but rumours always remained of a legacy left behind; a final, hidden fortress. At the behest of a diamond-rank client, I have spent the last few years searching the world for that fortress.”

Emir panned his gaze over the group.

“As you have no doubt surmised, the fortress has been found, here in the Greenstone region. There is a lake, at the bottom of which the remains of that fortress have been long hidden. My people found it, but the true sanctum is not so easily penetrated. The legacy found therein comes with a test; a trial for who seek it out. It is held within an astral space that, even once unsealed, will only admit iron-rankers. All attempts to otherwise penetrate it have fallen short. Only by activating the trials will it open, and only for those who have the longest road left to walk. Iron-rankers, like you.”

He paused, giving the crowd a few moments for his words to sink in.

“As I said, this fortress is at the bottom of a lake. My people will be on hand to grant you access, but reaching the depths – and they are depths – will be the first requirement of participation. If you cannot manage even that much, then there is no hope of you completing the trial anyway. All further details will be on the open contract, which will be posted shortly.”

With that, Emir floated away.

Many towns and village in the delta had accommodation just for adventurers. It always paid to make the people who killed the monsters for you welcome and comfortable. Certain hub locations were especially used to adventurers passing through and people knew better than to take a second glance at the often oddly dressed and heavily armed individuals.

Into one of the larger establishments went two figures shrouded in dark cloaks. This was not unusual, as more than a few young adventurers became enamoured with being mysterious. One of the cloaks was obviously magical, seemingly made from darkness itself. The other was a dark brown, plain, but high quality. The two adventurers paid for one of the larger private rooms and immediately went inside.

Jason’s cloak vanished and Hester pushed the hood back on hers. Hester was the only Asiatic-looking person he had seen in this world outside of his own reflection. Her appearance was closer to South Asian than his own Japanese features.

“Where are you from, Hester?” he asked.

“Pranay, originally,” she said.

Jason was slowly learning about his new world, including the geography. Pranay was this world’s equivalent of Sri Lanka, larger and further south than his own. It made for a huge landmass in the middle of what, in his world, was called the Indian Ocean.

“What’s it like?” he asked.

“A lot like the delta, actually,” she said. “I became an adventurer to see the world, but now travel is so easy for me that I spend more and more of my time back home.”

“That’s nice,” Jason said. “I’d like to be able to do that, someday. My home’s a little farther away, though.”

“Nothing’s impossible,” Hester said. “Working for Emir, I’ve seen enough diamond rankers to learn that much. Even from what little I’ve witnessed, they function on a scale of power that’s hard to believe.”

Hester drew a circle in the air with her hand, which shimmered into being as a portal when she was done. They stepped through, into the cloud palace. Jason had to take out his entry stone to do so, as the cloud palace’s protections worked even against portals.

For most people, their aura imprint could be set into the cloud palace to permit entry, the very thing Emir publicly claimed he would erase. In truth, the same effect that prevented Jason from being tracked prevented the cloud palace from collecting his imprint to allow him entry. He had to be given an access stone that the cloud palace could read, which was itself bound uniquely to Jason.

They arrived in the cloud palace’s guest wing lounge, where a large group was already having lunch. Emir and Constance, Belinda and Jory, Rufus and his parents, plus Gary and Jason’s team. Julian was there as well, his throat injury fully healed.

Jason nodded a greeting at Julian as he and Hester sat down.

“I didn’t go too deep, did I?” Jason asked.

“No, it was perfect,” Julian said. “The potion alone was enough to deal with the damage. You know your throat-slitting.”

“You have no idea,” Humphrey said. “I have this recording you should see.”

“Will you stop showing that to people?”

“The bit where you let the spear hit you is the creepiest,” Belinda said. “The way you pull it out and lick it? So disgusting.”

“It really was,” Jason said. “I think Jonah might have nicked a bowel.”

“You don’t have bowels,” Clive said.

“I don’t have bowels?”

“As essence users,” Clive explained, “we all go through physiological changes as we increase in rank. At iron rank, our digestion starts operating very differently. Our gold-rankers here don't even need to breathe. Each time we rank up, in addition to making our bodies superior vessels for magic, there are changes to how our bodies operate. It's one of the reasons we can suffer more damage than others. Many of the vulnerable points in the torso are less vulnerable because we use what's in there less. By the time we reach silver and gold, we are mostly just containers for a living mass that serves to rapidly heal injury.”

“Are you sure you don't want to come work for me?” Emir asked.

“Stop trying to poach my team member,” Jason said.

“I'm still unclear as to the point of what we did out there,” Julian said. “I'm grateful for the opportunity, don't get me wrong. Coming to work for you, Mr Bahadir, is a much better opportunity than some prize I likely wouldn't get, but I don't understand the purpose of setting the iron-rankers on each another.”

“Chaos,” Jason said. “You've heard about the five people who were implanted with star seeds, yes?”

“Yes,” Julian said.

“We're confident that the goal of implanting those people was to sow discord,” Emir said. “One died and we've captured and purged two of the others. Two remain at large, however, and the attention and resources we dedicate to finding them is attention and resources we aren't sending after the Builder cult.”

“Emir's declaration today basically gave everyone an opening to spend the next couple of days engaging in controlled chaos,” Jason said. “The hope is that the Builder cult seeks to tip that chaos from controlled to uncontrolled in the lead up to the open contract, making it easier to enact their plans for the astral space.”

“What's that got to do with you?” Julian asked.

“Jason is now the focal point of this iron-rank mess Emir has made,” Gabriel said. “He's close with Emir, but suddenly outside of Emir's protection. There wouldn't be a much better way to muddy the waters than implant Jason with a star seed, which we're hoping they attempt.”

“Even if they don't bite, it doesn't really cost us anything to try,” Jason said.

“What if they succeed and you actually get implanted?” Julian asked.

“That is the part that concerns me, as well,” Gary said. “I don't like this plan.”

“Jason will be watched at all times,” Emir assured him. “I've brought in a specialist.”

Emir nodded at a man sitting at the table that no one had noticed appear. He was a middle-aged man, the kind of grizzled that perpetually made him look like he should be in the wilderness somewhere, hunting something.

“You had Hester bring in Cal,” Gabriel said.

“What my husband means to say is hello,” Arabelle said. “How've you been, Cal?”

“Busy,” Cal said, his voice as gravelly as his face. “It's good to see you, Bella.”

“This is Callum Morse,” Emir introduced. “If he doesn't want to be seen, no one short of diamond rank will see him. He'll be over Jason's shoulder at every moment until the contract begins. Hopefully, he'll bag us some Builder cultists.”

The lunch went on, the large group chatting away. Julian, Clive and Neil were all quiet, intimidated by gold-rank company, although a born pedagogue, Clive was easily drawn out at the chance to explain one thing or another.

“You know, Cal,” Gabriel said, “Jason here can keep lies out of his aura. You're the only other person I've seen do that.”

“How do you all know each other?” Jason asked.

“Oh, we were all a team, back when we were young and foolish like you kids,” Emir said. “After we got to gold, though, our priorities started to shift. Cal here was happy to spend the rest of his days carving his way through the monster population, but he was having to look harder for a challenge. I wanted adventures more exotic than what the Adventure Society was offering and took up fortune hunting for hire.”

He waved a finger between Gabriel and Arabelle.

“These two,” he said, “wanted to go off and make babies. Utterly pointless.”

“Excuse me?” Rufus said. “I'm one of those babies.”

“And how long did it take you to even hold a worthwhile conversation?” Emir asked. “Children aren't a time-effective proposition.”

“I'd like children someday,” Constance opined quietly.

“What's time anyway?” Emir asked, course-corrected rapidly. “When you live as long as we do, what's a little time in return for the joy of parenting?”

After lunch, Hester returned Jason to the guest house from which they had portalled into the cloud palace. She did not remain behind, with Sophie taking Hester's position under the brown cloak. The pair then left, ostensibly laying low after events in the marshalling yard while leaving a trail for the Builder cult to follow.

Chapter 148: Impossible to Subdue

“What is it you need me for?” Sophie asked.

“You’re not happy with enjoying a nice day in the delta?”

They were strolling along an embankment road, Jason setting their meandering pace.

“It’s not terrible,” Sophie conceded. “I’m just not sure why you need me to join you on the hook.”

“You know about fishing, but you didn’t know about rain?”

“I probably heard someone mention it, but it isn’t something that really comes up.”

“Seems like it would be,” Jason said. “Delta merchants, sailors. And you weren’t born here, right? Didn’t you come to this city on a ship? Surely that got rained on.”

“Who told you that? Was it Belinda?”

“Don’t recall,” Jason said. “One of the Berts, maybe?”

“I don’t really remember anything before Greenstone,” Sophie said. “I was very young. My earliest memories are of my father working for the Silva family.”

“My dad’s done a lot of work for the government,” Jason said. “That’s worse than working with criminals, believe me.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” Sophie said. “Humphrey warned me about that.”

“Teenagers,” Jason said, shaking his head. “No discretion.”

“That’s rich coming from you,” she said. “This whole plan is formulated on people believing that you would make a huge spectacle of yourself. Which they did.”

“Sorry about the whole ‘you do what I say, woman,’ thing. I was kind of leaning into the villainy.”

“That seems to be your first reaction,” she said. “I’ve seen the recording of that ridiculous fight.”

“It was pretty over the top, right? I was just looking for a way to win. That meant killing a bunch of teenagers, so going movie monster seemed the natural choice.”

“Why do you do that?” she asked.

“Do what?”

“Make reference to things you know people won’t understand. Is it part of the whole crazy persona you have going?”

“No,” Jason said. “Well, yes, probably. Where I come from they call it a weirdness coupon. If people expect you to do strange things, then they accept it when you do. Have

you ever noticed how people don't expect me to respect authority or adhere to ordinary codes of conduct."

"I've been waiting for someone to kick the crap out of you for that."

"It's happened, once or twice," Jason said. "But I get away with it, more than not. How many times have you seen me doing something and have someone tell you 'oh, that's just Jason?'"

"Quite a lot, actually."

"And there you are," Jason said. "I've never been good at fitting in, so I've learned how to do standing out the right way. I admit that I've taken in pretty far, here, but magic and monsters make everything... bigger. Bigger personalities, bigger dangers. Half measures don't work and you have to find a way to either make your mark or fade into the background. Getting caught in the middle will just get you chewed up and spat out. Go big or go home, as they say where I come from."

"So all this strangeness is just an act?"

"Not at all," he said. "There's method to the madness, sure, but there's also madness to the madness. It's about leaning into your strengths and working with what you've got. A lesson you could very much stand to learn."

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

"Look at your circumstances before Clive and I came along," he said. "You and Belinda, scrambling from one problem to the next. Every escape dropping you into a worse situation, the city tightening around you like a noose. You know why that is?"

"Because life sucks."

"You had some rough circumstances and no mistake," Jason conceded. "You went at them the wrong way, though."

"Is that so?"

"I told you that you have to stand out or fade away, or you'll get chewed up in the middle. You got chewed up pretty good. I've learned a fair bit about what you've been through and what you did about it, and it's plain to see what happened."

"You think you know me?" she asked.

"I'm starting to get there," he said. "You kept choosing to fade into the background, but everything you did was about making your mark. You've been telling yourself you're doing one thing while you're really doing the opposite."

"So, you know what I really should have done?"

"Not at all," Jason said. "I haven't lived your life or faced your circumstances. Compared to you, my life has been sunshine and rainbows. But you have to realise that

you're never going to fade into the background. It's not just the way you look, although that's certainly a thing."

"You have a problem with the way I look."

"Of course I don't," Jason said. "I'm a straight man with eyes. But the way you look is a perfect reflection of who you are. Your hair, your clothes; you choose them for practicality. They shout to the world that you want to do your thing and don't want anyone to bother you. But they can't hide what you are."

"And what's that?" she asked, voice thick with challenge.

"Fierce. Arresting. Indomitable. If you asked Cole Silva or Lucian Lamprey why they chased after you, they'd probably say it was because of the way you look. Maybe that's how it started, but it's not why they kept chasing so hard for so long. They'd be lying, especially to themselves. A certain kind of man is insecure about his power. If he senses a challenge to it, he has to possess or destroy whatever is making him feel challenged."

"Is that what you think? You're reading too much into a pair of sleazy guys used to getting what they want."

"That's the whole point of what I'm saying," Jason said. "They didn't get what they were after. I might have come along at the end but Lamprey was chasing you for months. Silva for years, from what I've heard. If you weren't captured by my resourcefulness and dashing good looks, you'd probably still be out there."

"Wasn't it mostly Clive who caught us?"

"I did most of the fighting and chasing."

"Like a minion, while he did all the set up. Like a boss."

"Wouldn't that make you Belinda's minion?"

"I'm alright with that."

"That's actually really nice," Jason said. "That level of trust."

"You don't have people you trust?"

"Actually, I'm thick with them," Jason said. "I didn't have a lot of friends, back home. Someone hurt me, made it hard to trust people. I did a lot of getting chewed up in the middle, of being too afraid to embrace what I really am."

"A nonsensical loon?"

"Yes," he said. "This world forced me to answer new challenges. To be more than I was and find people I could trust and rely on. I could have stayed quiet, worked my way up as another unremarkable iron-ranker. But you know what? I am remarkable. For good or ill."

He gave her a wry smile.

“So are you, whether you like it or not. Most people, faced with your circumstances, would capitulate. Endure to get by. You didn’t. You took extreme measure after extreme measure, even as you told yourself you were trying to lay low. You’re so bad at taking the quiet road that you followed it right into a storm of politicians, crime lords and adventurers. You can’t hide because you burn too bright. Until you accept that, you’re just going to keep getting chewed up.”

She didn’t respond, thinking as she threw him wary glances.

“What does ‘indomitable’ mean?” she asked, finally.

“Impossible to subdue,” Jason said.

“I’m your indentured servant.”

“Are you, though?” Jason asked. “If you wanted to be gone, could I have stopped you? I don’t imagine for a second that Belinda hasn’t figured out how to slip that tracking bracelet. You probably got something on your person right now that will let you do it if you need to.”

They walked in silence for a long time.

“You still didn’t answer my question,” she realised out loud.

“What question?”

“Why do you need me out here with you.”

“You’re easier to track,” he said.

“And you’re not easy to track?”

“Nope. I have a power that makes it hard.”

“No actual skills, then.”

“None whatsoever,” he said, pumping a fist in the air. “Magic powers for the win!”

“Why are you so proud about something you didn’t earn?”

“Pride is an easy lever to pull,” Jason said. “You should never let people know what you’re actually proud of.”

“Are you ever not manipulating people?”

“We all manipulate the people around us,” Jason said. “We all show different faces to friends, family, colleagues. Enemies.”

“You think that’s the same thing?”

“You think it’s different? You think my friends don’t see past the bombast and the bluster? Do you think Jory doesn’t know how I feel, healing people in his clinic? That Humphrey doesn’t know my pride, helping protect a village from monsters? That Rufus doesn’t feel my triumph when I push my abilities a little bit further and grow that little bit stronger?”

“Aren’t you just making it harder for them?”

“We all make it hard. Rufus can be rigid when he needs to be flexible. Humphrey can be short-sighted when he needs to look deeper. Jory needs to be more ambitious before he can truly accomplish the things he wants to. As for me, well, I’m the worst of the lot. I’m constantly causing trouble a little politeness would avoid. I pick fights I have no business being in, make enemies that would overlook me if I just learned to keep my mouth shut. I’m prickly, manipulative. Completely lacking in deference.”

“If you’re so self-aware, then why not fix all that?”

“Because they aren’t problems,” Jason said. “They’re part of who I am, and I’m happier with that now than I ever have been. I told you, this world needs you to be bigger. Maybe it takes an outsider to see that clearly.”

He gave her a smile.

“I don’t know what you are but you need to stop hiding, because I know a hider isn’t it,” he said. “I’ve been lucky to find people willing to put up with me, good and bad. Figure out what you are, and be the ever-living crap out of that thing. Then find the people willing to put up with it. You know it’s what Belinda has been waiting for, right?”

“What are you talking about?”

“She knows what you are better than anyone,” Jason said. “Better than you do. My guess? She’s been waiting for you to come into yourself for years.”

“She’s not just some addendum to me, waiting for me to get it together,” Sophie said. “She’s brilliant, inquisitive. If she didn’t keep tying herself down with me, she could accomplish incredible things.”

Jason burst out laughing.

“You think that’s funny?” Sophie asked angrily.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “I’d bet money that the two of you have been pushing each other along, both thinking you’re pulling the other back. Wexler, this is your chance. Hers, too. You get those essences she’s after and then both of you find out what you’re really capable of.”

Sophie stopped, throwing out her arms.

“What is with you, Asano?” she asked. “This whole thing. Getting us out from under Lamprey. Essences, adventuring. The speeches about making something of myself. No dismissing the question, no hiding behind a mouthful of nonsense. Seriously. Why?”

Jason also stopped, turning back to look at her. The perpetual, smug, half-grin fell from his face. His eyes, normally twinkling with some joke only he seemed to know about became clear and sharp.

“Because I could,” he said. “You needed it, I could do it, so I did it.”

“Why us?”

“Why not you? Jory wanted to help you and I have a soft spot for people railing against authority when the smart move is to give in. It’s one of the things people hate most about me.”

“Just like that. You put yourself in the path of Cole Silva and Lucian Lamprey because your friend wanted to help us?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s my friend.”

“You’ll go that far for a friend?”

“How do you think I made so many great friends?”

“You’re serious.”

“Unless I’m just manipulating you.”

“Gods damn it, you’re obnoxious.”

“I’m just saying,” Jason said. “Honest vulnerability can be a powerful tool.”

“Didn’t you tell your lady friend that it was only a tool of seduction?”

“I was lying. You know what I’m like.”

“Do you ever stop?”

“Do you want me to?”

“Yes!”

“Really?” he asked a grin creeping onto his face.

“Shut up,” she said and set off again, marching past him along the embankment road. Jason looked at her, shaking his head and then followed.

“Such a tsundere.”

“I heard that!”

“Do you even know what that means?”

“Shut up!”

Chapter 149: The Price We Pay Doesn't Matter

Jason and Sophie were sitting on a fallen log, eating sandwiches.

"It's about time to head back," Jason said. "Looks like we weren't tantalising bait after all. It's a little ironic, given all the people who were chasing after you."

"They might try on the way back," Sophie said. "How likely do you think this is to work?"

"I figure it's less likely to work than not," he said. "Still worth a try, though, given the stakes."

"How bad are these people, exactly?"

"According to Clive, if they had been left to their own devices in the astral space, they would have killed everyone between here and Boko, so... bad."

"I can't even imagine destruction on that kind of scale."

"That's what makes it so dangerous," Jason said. "These people we're dealing with; the LEGO Lovecraft monster they work for operates on a scale far beyond our ability to comprehend. A strange, alien mind that doesn't care about the lives it takes any more than we do about the bugs we step on without noticing."

"How do you even fight something like that?"

"Clive said those things operate in a sort of equilibrium, balancing out each other."

"It doesn't feel balanced if they can kill us and everyone we could get to in a week's travel."

"No, it doesn't," Jason said. He wiped his hands together to brush off the crumbs and pushed himself to his feet, Sophie lightly doing the same.

"Let's head off, then."

"So, this is the last one," Danielle Geller said.

Of the five people into whom star seeds had been planted, four had been found and treated. After the disastrous treatment of Jonah, the next three had the star seeds extracted without killing the host, although they were left in dire need of healing.

They had finally found the fifth, returning her to Greenstone via Hester, Emir Bahadir's portal user. She was now strapped to a vertical platform, arms, legs, torso and head all individually bound in place. They were in the temple of Purity, in one of what they referred to as purgation rooms. Although scrubbed to immaculate cleanliness, there was a smell to the place that made Danielle think that bad things had happened there.

There was a small crowd gathered to watch the purging. Danielle had accompanied the girl's parents, who had insisted on being present, despite the archbishop's objections. He had warned them that their daughter had been affected by the star seed the longest and may not survive its extraction. Also present was Tabitha Gert, the head of the Adventure Society inquiry team. She was the de facto head of the Adventure Society so long as the inquiry continued and had yet to witness a star seed being extracted. Clive Standish was the Magic Society representative, with the other members of the group being Emir and Thalia Mercer. Like Danielle, Thalia had witnessed every star seed extraction.

The ritual went as the archbishop had warned. The wires had retracted from their infiltration throughout the girl's body before the seed was extracted, but the damage they left behind was too great. Even immediately applied silver-rank healing was unable to ameliorate the strain and she died with a jerking shudder. Danielle led away the grieving parents while the rest of the group was taken by the archbishop to a meeting room.

"That was the last of the five," Tabitha Gert said, taking control of the meeting. "Now we must completely refocus our attention on the builder cult's future activities. What progress are we making?"

"The Magic Society has made a couple of breakthroughs," Clive said. "First we know what they're after and how they are going after it. The astral magic techniques they are using are unlike anything we've seen before, presumably delivered to our world by the Builder. It's more advanced than the astral magic we have but we've already started unravelling its secrets. I can tell you that to achieve their objectives, they have to work from inside the astral spaces."

"Which brings our focus squarely on you, Mr Bahadir," Tabitha said. "Do you still intend to open this astral space?"

"I do."

"I'm tempted to prohibit you from doing so," Tabitha said, "but it may represent the best chance of catching the Builder cult's tail. Have you found a way to catch out anyone they try to slip into the group?"

"Not an effective one, no," Emir said. "The only means we have to identify them would be the presence of a star seed."

"We have found a ritual that will allow us to discover one within a person," the archbishop said. "It is quick and simple enough that we can administer it to each person before allowing them to participate."

"If they don't have one, though," Emir said, "there is no way to detect a person's true loyalty. If there were, I'm not so certain I'd approve of its existence."

“What about other angles of approach?” Tabitha asked.

“Rufus Remore continues to coordinate with my father,” Elspeth Arella said. “They are tracking what they believe to be supplies the Builder cult imported, looking for where those supplies ended up. This may give us a line on their key stronghold. They are currently trying to determine a final destination.”

“Your father,” Tabitha said. “This is the criminal leader, Adris Dorgan?”

“Yes,” Arella said.

“Good,” Tabitha said. “In times like these, we need to put aside minor concerns like criminality and use every resource available. Keep me updated whenever you find something new.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Arella said.

“What about the former star seed recipients?” Tabitha asked. “Any progress?”

“The three survivors are all awake,” Thalia said. “They have limited recollection of their time under the Builder cult's influence. Their memories are strongest right after the seeds were implanted, which they all report as being like someone else was controlling them. They describe it as being trapped in their own minds, wanting to scream for help but being unable to do so. As the seeds took further hold, their memories become increasingly scattered until nothing is left but flashes.”

“Anything useful amongst what they do recall?”

“I have people working with them,” Thalia said. “We’re being careful because it would be easy to create false memories with leading questions. Everything they can remember is being collated and examined, looking for any trails we can follow.”

“Do you need any assistance or resources to speed up the process?” Tabitha asked.

“Attempting to accelerate things is exactly the wrong approach,” Thalia said. “Doing it right will take as long as it takes.”

“And you aren’t biased because your son is one of the three?”

“It doesn’t matter if I’m biased or not,” Thalia said, matter-of-factly. “Try to interfere and I’ll rip your arm off and shove it down your throat.”

Tabitha frowned but didn’t push the issue further.

“How goes the inquiry,” Emir asked. “Will you be staying in the city for long?”

“The expedition may have been what brought us here,” Tabitha said, “but it has become clear that the way the expedition was planned and conducted was the result of a larger problem. The true concern is that the culture around this branch of the Adventure Society is a festering sore. We excised the worst people and demoted almost everyone.

Over the next few weeks we will be going through all the members we didn't revoke the membership of entirely, seeing who truly deserved their rank."

"That's good to hear," Emir said, turning a gaze on Arella. "How much influence is our esteemed director going to have on that process?"

"We have determined that the director was largely influenced by the culture in which she obtained the position, with her mistakes being attempts to operate effectively within it. It is not an excuse for certain failings, but we feel that coming from outside the local nobility remains an asset moving forward. Ultimately, she will resume full authority once the inquiry is over, therefore she will, of course, have input on the dispensation of rank for local members."

"Your concern is Asano," Arella said to Emir. "He will be assessed fairly. How is your little bait operation going, by the way?"

"Who told you about that?" Emir asked.

"There was no need," Arella said. "Asano making a spectacle of himself is nothing new but he generally does so with purpose. You wanted the Builder cult to make a play for him, trying to create a fresh distraction after we finished hunting down all their seeds."

"It seems they aren't going for it," Emir said. "There was never a guarantee of it working. They don't want to risk exposing themselves, spoiling a chance at sending people into the astral space."

"Or maybe they just don't want to risk getting involved with Asano," Arella said. "That boy is more insidious than a star seed."

"What plans do we have for intercepting any Builder cult agents they place in the astral space?" Tabitha asked.

"None," Emir said. "I don't know what's in there and I've been looking for it for years. All we can do is ask the ones we trust to keep a lookout and act if they can."

Anisa once more entered the foreman's office in the temple of Purity's construction site.

"You were right to not go after Asano," she said without preamble.

"Admitting you're wrong," the foreman said. "You don't seem the type."

"It was bait," Anisa said. "They were trying to catch your people."

"I know," the foreman said. "He had a gold-ranker following him. We lost a silver and three bronze who had to kill themselves trying to take him."

"You actually tried?" she asked. "You told me you wouldn't."

“I considered your arguments after our last little talk,” he said. “You changed my mind, only for me to discover that I should have kept my own counsel, after all.”

“You don’t seem worried,” she said. “This is a disaster for you. Losing a silver-ranker.”

“The price we pay doesn’t matter,” the foreman said. “Only the objective. Using Bahadir’s pet iron-ranker to disrupt the people looking for us was a target of opportunity, nothing more. One less silver-ranker doesn’t matter for an astral space that silver-rankers cannot enter.”

“What if they get information from the people you sent after Asano?”

“They won’t.”

Jason and Sophie looked at the four strange, crystalline stars that had once been people. Blood and flash stained the crystal where it had exploded out of them.

The gold-ranker, Callum, appeared next to them.

“That is all of them,” he said in his gravelly voice. “I was unable to disable them before they killed themselves. It may not be possible to do so.”

“I didn’t sense them coming,” Jason said.

“Me either, and I have an aura sensing power,” Sophie said.

“One was silver, the others bronze,” Callum said.

“Thanks for being on the ball, Cal,” Jason said. “They were coming in hard and fast.”

Around the village, people were watching from hiding after the unexpected explosion of violence.

“They won’t try again,” Callum said. “We should return to the city. Emir will likely take these and have them studied. Perhaps there is something to be learned.”

“I’ll go find the village head,” Jason said. “We need somewhere to put them until Hester shows up. If we leave them in the middle of the village like this, they’re going to creep people out.”

“Tell them to make sure people leave them alone,” Sophie added. “I don’t think random villagers poking these things is a good idea.”

“Sensible,” Callum agreed.

Jason found the village head and explained the situation, meaning he said there was some adventurer stuff happening and people should stay away from the pointy magic things. The elder offered them a barn on the village outskirts that was disused after suffering damage from a monster attack.

“I found a spot for them,” Jason called out as he returned to the others. “There’s something I should probably do, first. Cal, is it okay if we loot these guys?”

“Go ahead.”

“Alright. Wexler, take those two over there and I’ll get the others.”

Jason touched part of the bloody remains smeared over the crystalline stars.

- You have received permission to loot [Builder Cultist].
 - 14 [Silver Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 211 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 116 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

Behind him he heard coins raining onto the ground, then Sophie’s muffled complaints.

“Oh, what is this nonsense,” she complained as Jason turned around to see her encased in metal armour.

“I think you looted his armour,” Jason.

“Oh, you think?” she said, pushing up the front of the helmet to reveal her face.

“Clearly you’re the brains of the operation, figuring that one out.”

“You might want to take that off,” Jason suggested. “I don’t think it’s really your style.”

“This description that popped up says I don’t meet the requirements,” she said. “How can I not meet the requirements when I’m already wear... ouch. Hey, I think this thing is stinging me.”

“Cal, help me get it off her,” Jason said. Callum nodded, moving to assist.

“It will get worse the longer you wear it,” Callum warned Sophie as they started pulling off the various metal plates strapped to her body. By the time they finished, Sophie was biting back grunts of pain as Callum used his gold-rank strength to roughly yank off the pieces, Sophie’s clothes and skin scraped by straps and buckles as he did.

“That was unpleasant, she said. “You can do the rest of the looting.”

“Probably for the best,” Jason said, tossing her a jar of healing unguent from his inventory. He stowed the armour in his inventory, which was an uncommon bronze armour with some basic reinforcing and self-repair enchantments. Then he checked the next body.

- You have received permission to loot [Builder Cultist].
 - 2 [Gold Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 28 [Silver Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 211 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 316 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - [Amulet of Intermittent Armour] has been added to your inventory.
-

“Ooh, gold coins. And they had the exact same number of bronze coins. That’s odd.”
He pulled out the magic item to take a look.

Item: [Amulet of Intermittent Armour] (bronze rank, uncommon)

A neck-chain and amulet that accumulates protective power (jewellery, necklace).

- Effect: Slowly accumulate instances of [Guardian’s Blessing], to a maximum based on your bronze-rank [Recovery] attribute.
- [Guardian’s Blessing] (boon, holy): Damage from all sources is reduced by a small amount. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Damage reduction is less effective against damage from silver-rank or higher sources. When an instance is consumed, gain an instance of [Blessing’s Bounty].
- [Blessing’s Bounty] (heal-over-time, holy, stacking): Heal over time. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
- You do not meet the requirements to use this item.

Jason had several bronze-rank items collecting in his inventory. He had never actually sold the bizarre hydra whip and he had a gauntlet he took from the bronze-rank tidal troll he fought. Now he had the armour and the amulet looked like a useful item for Sophie when he reached bronze rank.

The last body produced something altogether unexpected.

-
- [Star Seed (Builder)] has been added to your inventory.
-

Chapter 150: Make the Most of It

Anisa stormed through the main hall of the temple of Purity making for the exit. The church functionary at the doors stepped out to meet her.

“You go out late, Lady Priestess,” he said. “Worship is carried out under the sun’s pure light.”

“You think you know the doctrine better than me?” Anisa snarled.

“You are the one stepping out in the hours of dark deeds,” the man said.

Anisa stopped, looking the man up and down. No essences in his aura and somewhere between forty and fifty, yet still the lowest rank of church official. She sneered.

“Using your meagre measure of authority to make yourself feel powerful is the sign of an impure heart,” she said. She reached into her robes and handed him a token. “Take this and report for personal inquisition.”

His face went as white as hers.

“Lady Priestess,” he begged. “Surely you can’t send me to inquisition for such a small matter.”

“That is the very problem,” she said. “You thought it was such a small matter that you would suffer no repercussions, but impure seeds lead to rotten fruit. Your failings will be found and scoured from your soul. It will become pristine, once again.”

She swept past him and out, into the grounds, along what was becoming an unpleasantly familiar path to the construction site. As she approached, the foreman emerged from the dormitory huts for the workers.

“It is late, Madam Priestess, and I know your people care not for the hours of darkness. If the purpose of your visit is licentious, then I will eagerly accommodate you.”

“Shut your foul mouth,” she told him. “Your ever-growing list of failures has forced the archbishop to demand your presence.”

“I thought the archbishop never wanted to see me.”

“Your repeated bungling has placed him in a position where he must look to rectify the disasters you’ve orchestrated himself.”

She reached into her bag and threw out a white robe.

“Put this on and keep your face covered,” she commanded.

The man picked the robe up out of the dirt and started slipping it on, over his clothes.

“What is this about, exactly?” he asked.

“We have moving beyond the point of having conversations,” she told him. “Your task now is to answer questions, follow instructions and otherwise keep your mouth shut.”

“I will remind you, priestess, that we are partners in this.”

“Partners implies a mutually beneficial exchange, not one side making messes and the other cleaning them up. Follow.”

She strode off, the hooded Builder cultist following behind. She led him through the grounds, using a key to open a gate in a walled garden, then locking it again behind them. Inside the walls was a private garden, with an inward-facing circle of seats in the middle. The archbishop, Nicolas Hendren, was already seated and waiting. Anisa took another seat and the cultist tried to do the same.

“Remain on your feet,” she rebuked him.

“Isn’t that a little petty, priestess?”

“That’s enough from you,” the archbishop told him. “You will stand, you will listen and you will answer.”

“This is hardly in the spirit of partnership, Archbishop.”

“If our affiliations were not spread so far beyond this city, our partnership would be over and you no more than a stain left on the ground we purged you from,” the archbishop snarled. “You have conducted nothing but a cavalcade of disasters. You lost the astral space, which is one thing, but you kept us so far out of that operation that we had no means to warn you, costing you people and resources, leaving you to crawl back.”

“I think you could have managed if you truly wished to, Archbishop. If you are going to bring it up then I must question the dedication of your efforts.”

“I will not endanger my people to mitigate the failure of yours any more than I must. Yet, even then, it seems I can never stop doing so as the only thing you do not fail to do is disappoint. You could have held the astral space if you had a clockwork king, yet your man failed to summon it properly in spite of the astounding level of resources we provided your agent. Not only did he fail to summon it, he summoned some lunatic who not only killed him but almost revealed my priestess’ involvement and now has captured one of your star seeds. Intact.”

“What?” the cultist asked. “What are you talking about?”

“You assured my priestess that even in the face of yet another failure, they could glean nothing from your people. By what twisted mode of thought does an intact, unspent star seed constitute nothing?”

“That shouldn’t be possible.”

“You shouldn’t be this bad at the tasks assigned to you,” the archbishop said.

“There’s disappointment all around.”

“You have to retrieve it!” the cultist said.

“Clean up another one of your messes?” the archbishop asked. “It was your genius plan to implant the star seeds in the first place that has put so much attention on them.”

“And put you in such a prime position to learn everything they were up to,” the cultist retorted. “You were happy enough at the time, so don’t try and retroactively admonish me now. I know hypocrisy is a core tenet of your church but I’m not a follower.”

The archbishop launched out of his seat and struck the cultist with a backhand slap, sending him sprawling to the ground.

“You will watch your rotten tongue of the lands belonging to our lord, you monstrosity-worshipping filth.”

The cultist pushed himself back to his feet.

“Did I touch a soft spot, Archbishop? You may not like harbouring the likes of me, but you do it and you’ll continue to do it.”

“The only reason I tolerate you is your kind’s wider accord with the church. Given my own way, I would burn the lot of you out and be done with it.”

“But it isn’t up to you, is it, Archbishop. So you will be a good little boy, do as you’re told and render us such assistance as we require. And what we require now is that star seed.”

The archbishop’s face twisted reluctance, but he didn’t refute it.

“What can they do with it?” he asked.

“There are many possibilities, none of them good,” the cultist said. “It could expose us all, employed the right way. If they have people who know what they are doing. A sufficiently skilled astral magic specialist will know exactly how to use it.”

“So, what can you use it for?” Jason asked.

“No idea,” Clive said.

“Really?” Jason asked. “I figured you’d take one look at it and be all ‘yeah, now we can give ‘em a good ol’ kick in the beans!’”

“You thought I’d say that?”

“You say that kind of thing all the time.”

“I’ve never said anything like that in my entire life.”

The Magic Society vault contained all manner of dangerous and restricted objects, sealed away into various rooms. Built into the very foundation of the Island, it was not just

under the Magic Society campus but under the loop line, subterranean water passages and utility tunnels that crisscrossed below ground. Jason, Clive, Rufus, Emir and Danielle Geller were in the room Clive had set aside for the star seed.

It was in a secure box of rune-covered glass. The seed itself looked like a sphere, but close examination revealed it was comprised of tiny cubes all adhered together. Oddly, the star seed was the colour of common, unremarkable brick. The pseudo-sphere was held in place by a dull metal frame; a cube with tines to hold the orb in place.

“Did the frame come with it, or did we add that?” Emir asked.

“It came with it,” Jason said. “Is it just me, or is the frame the exact size of an essence cube.”

“I think you’re right,” Emir said. “That’s a somewhat unsettling thought.”

“I’m not sure that placing it in the vault was the best idea,” Danielle said. “Leaving it in your storage space and being very careful who you told about it might have been better.”

“Stuff that,” Jason said. “I’m not going to leave that thing in my inventory and let the Builder use it to backdoor me.”

“We don’t know that’s even possible,” Clive said.

“Six months ago, I didn’t know anything that happened in the last five months was possible and a good chunk of it has tried to kill me. The things I don’t know train just keeps chugging along and I’m not going to let it park a hand up my bunghole and wave me about like a rakishly handsome sock puppet.”

The other three turned to look at him, except for Rufus, who just shook his head.

“Don’t bother,” he told the others.

“What?” Jason asked.

Danielle shook her head and turned to Clive. “Any ideas what we should do with the star seed?”

“Not off the top of my head,” Clive said. “I’ll have to do some research. I still wish you hadn’t killed Landemere Vane, Jason. Even his notes would have been good; sometimes it was like he was plucking these amazing innovations in astral magic out of thin air. His notes were all seized by the church of Purity after the blood cult revelation, though.”

“Why is it that the church of Purity got to take all his family’s stuff?” Jason asked Rufus.

“They were the ones who found out about the blood cult,” Rufus said. “I’m not sure how, but they took it to the courts, who gave them the rights to seize all their property if the claims were substantiated. They hired us to do exactly that, and you know the rest.”

“Seriously,” Jason said. “This place needs some severe legal reform. Also, you need to stop complaining that I killed that guy. He was going to eat me. He was in a blood cul...”

Jason’s eye went wide as he trailed off. He started pacing back and forth, absently tapping his head in thought. Emir was about to ask a question, Rufus gesturing him to silence. Jason stopped moving and looked up.

“We have a problem,” he said. “Ever since we found out about the Builder cult, something’s been bothering me.”

“You told me you’d seen it somewhere before,” Emir said.

“I had, and I just remembered where. Landemere Vane was a Builder cultist.”

“How could you know that?” Clive asked.

“You’ve seen my looting ability in action. When I looted Landemere Vane, it gave me the same message as when I looted the guy who gave me this. It asked if I wanted to loot the Builder cultist.”

Jason turned to Rufus.

“Remember when we first met in that basement?” Jason asked. “Cressida Vane and the guy with the shovel were talking about how I killed Landemere. What did she say about her son?”

“You’re right, I remember that,” Rufus said. “Something about ineffable things from beyond reality.”

“If Landemere Vane was a Builder cultist,” Jason said, “that means some very bad things.”

“It does,” Danielle agreed. “Very bad things, indeed.”

“I think I’ve missed a step,” Clive said. “How does Landemere Vane being a Builder cultist even matter, now? He died months ago.”

“And the church of Purity seized everything he owned, along with the rest of his family’s possessions,” Danielle Geller said. “Every note, letter and record. Even his work here at the Magic Society, right?”

“That’s right,” Rufus said. “Anisa Lasalle spent most of a day sorting through all their things, even before her church moved in to claim it all.”

“You think the church of Purity is working with the Builder cult?” Emir asked. “Why would they send Rufus and his team to Landemere Vane’s home?”

“Because his family was in the wrong cult,” Jason said. “You can see how they would paint it. Landemere Vane is afraid of what his family is involved in and informs the church of Purity. The church contracts adventurers to accompany their priestess to investigate. Everyone gets captured, but Landemere manages to free the priestess and escape. Once

Rufus and his team died, his family would come down on the rest of the Vane family like the hammer of god. That would leave Landemere as the sole heir and give the Builder cult a luxurious, isolated and secure base of operations. With the church of Purity helping him 'cleanse' the taint of the blood cult from the property, who is going to trek all the way out there to look closer? Having the seizure rights for the property was a contingency in case something went wrong or they needed to kill Landemere themselves, for whatever reason. A contingency that let them put a lid on the whole thing."

"We were captured before you ever arrived," Rufus said. "Landemere could have already arranged for her escape before you killed him, while she was waiting for everyone to leave and sacrifice us. Getting taken out of the group could have been just luck, or even an idea Landemere planted in the head of an impressionable staff member. If she wasn't, she could have escaped and fled the sacrifice chamber, leaving the rest of us to die."

Rufus' face reflected his reeling mind.

"The man who betrayed us to the blood cult," he said. "He was a church of Purity contact. When we didn't die as planned and wanted to question him, she killed him outright, claiming it was her church's authority."

He turned to Jason.

"You said it was suspicious at the time," Rufus said. "We talked about it."

"We couldn't have known," Jason said. "I was just against her because she was such a... we didn't get along."

"But it all went wrong," Rufus said. "None of them were expecting a punch-drunk outworlder to show up and mess everything up. Because of Jason, Landemere died and we survived, the exact opposite of their plan."

"Not all wrong," Jason said. "There is still the Landemere estate, under the control of the church. That could very well be where the Builder cult regrouped after escaping the astral space."

"This is all highly speculative," Emir said. "Making that kind of accusation against a church is no small matter and even I'm not completely convinced yet. We have no evidence."

"I'm the evidence," Jason said. "My ability showed that Landemere Vane was a Builder cultist."

"That's tangential to the culpability of the church, even with Rufus' corroboration," Danielle said. "And your testimony is a very shaky basis to move forward on."

"What's wrong with my testimony?" Jason asked.

“Jason,” Emir said. “You might operate in high circles, relative to Greenstone, but you’re still an iron-ranker. Plus, you spend a lot of time lying and running around like an insane person. There is a difference between people in authority putting up with you and having them listen to what you say.”

“He’s right,” Danielle said. “It won’t be easy to convince anyone that the church of Purity is involved with putting these star seeds in people when we can’t even answer why, let alone provide definitive proof.”

“Agreed,” Emir said. “I’m not going to be convinced myself, without something more compelling.”

“We need to find evidence before we can act,” Danielle said.

“The Vane estate,” Rufus said.

“Yes,” Danielle agreed. “While everyone is distracted with sending the iron-rankers into Emir’s astral space, we send a small team we can trust to investigate the estate.”

The sounds of many feet moving downstairs drew the group’s attention. Soon the entrance to their chamber was filled with a combination of Magic Society vault guards and temple of Purity church militants. At the lead was Anisa Lasalle.

“Anisa,” Jason said. “I was just thinking about how you should be strung up and burned for witchcraft.”

“Still jabbering nonsense, I see. Step back, Asano, and let the adults talk.”

“I don’t think your style of negotiation is going to work here, Jason,” Danielle said. “Perhaps you’ll leave this one to me?”

Jason nodded, stepping back.

“We’re here for the star seed,” Anisa said. “Get out of our way.”

“What claim do you have on the star seed?” Danielle asked.

“Our church has taken and destroyed all the previous ones,” Anisa said. “This new one is just another artefact of impurity to be annihilated.”

“Your church took the previous ones because they extracted them. This one was obtained by an adventurer.”

“It is still our duty to destroy it,” Anisa said.

“It is likely to be useful in our struggle against an elusive enemy,” Danielle said.

“I don’t care,” Anisa said. “My instructions are to retrieve it for destruction and nothing you say will divert me from that path.”

“Your church has no authority here,” Clive said. “I’m Adjunct Assistant to the Deputy Director of the Magic Society and I had this object placed here.”

“That’s some mouthful,” Anisa said. “Director is more succinct, and in this case, permanent. Lucian Lamprey has already released it to us.”

She took a document from her dimensional satchel and handed it to Clive. He skimmed over it with an unhappy expression, giving Danielle a reluctant nod.

“Very well,” Danielle said and stepped aside. One of the vault guards removed the glass casing around the star seed and Anisa took it, placing it in her satchel. Flashing Jason a triumphant grin, she swept out, taking her extensive entourage with her. Clive stuck his head out the door to look up the stairs and make sure they were gone.

“I’m surprised at your restraint,” Rufus said to Jason. “I was expecting you to do something extreme.”

“The star seed is potentially valuable,” Jason said. “Knowing that the church of Purity is in it up to their necks, when they don’t know we know? That’s more valuable, and acting now would have tipped our hand. Otherwise, Danielle would have stopped them.”

“Just so,” Danielle said. “For the first time, we are a step ahead. Now we need to make the most of it.”

Chapter 151:

Wake

Farrah hadn't had a formal memorial, just a handful of dinners and informal gatherings story-telling and everyone getting blind drunk. With the unexpected appearance of her parents, Rufus had bounded into action, organising a formal memorial for the day before the adventurers left for Emir's contest.

After the service, the traditional wake was held not in a bar but the guest wing lounge of the cloud palace. If nothing else, it had a better stock of alcohol than most taverns. Jason looked over the group, some of them from afar while others Farrah had come to know in her months in Greenstone. Some were friends, others less so, but there was no antagonism on display as people paid their respects. Jory was present, the kind-hearted man looking red-eyed as Belinda stood beside him for moral support. She and Sophie had never met Farrah and Sophie was not present with her friend.

Elsbeth Arella and her deputy, Genevieve, stayed just late enough to be respectful and left early enough to be discrete. Madam Landry, their long-time landlady appeared. She was not an essence user and was somewhat overwhelmed by the cloud palace and the company until taken in hand by Farrah's parents. Her fellow Magic Society members were in attendance, in two contingents.

One was the group around Clive who actually knew and worked with her; the other Lucian Lamprey and his deputy, Pochard Finn. Despite the superior schooling in social niceties between a foreign nobleman and the secret child of a crime lord, Lamprey lacked the social delicacy of Arella, overstaying his welcome long after she had left. Jason was grateful that Sophie was not in attendance, struggling to restrain his own distaste for the man. Determined not to make a fuss at Farrah's wake, he diplomatically avoided Lucian to avoid triggering any of his bad social habits.

Lamprey himself, however, had other ideas. He was drinking Emir's expensive alcohol faster than anyone else in the room and, half in the bag, sought out Jason with an expression of half confused drunk and half determined anger.

"Asano," he called out loudly as he approached. Rufus moved to intervene but was arrested by Danielle Geller's hand on his arm.

"If Jason is ever going to live up to his potential," she quietly told Rufus, "he needs to show that he can deal with situations with tact instead of bombast, bravado and provocation."

"Now isn't the time for lessons," Rufus hissed at her.

“This is exactly the time,” she asserted. “We are adventurers, Rufus. Our most important lessons come from confronting monsters.”

Lamprey swaggered up to Jason, glancing around to make sure he had an audience. His deputy, Finn, tried to guide him away but Lamprey brushed him off. Jason turned from the conversation he was having to face Lamprey. Jason’s expression was schooled into blank composure.

“Director Lamprey,” Jason said. “Thank you for attending. Farrah’s membership in the Magic Society was very important to her; I know she would appreciate the strong representation the society has presented here. For you to come in person is very gratifying.”

“You think I don’t see through you, Asano?” Lamprey said in the way drunk people have of being loud while thinking themselves quiet. “You think you’re so smart, playing people off one another, bending the rules into whatever shape you like. But cleverness didn’t save your friend, did it? When she came face to face with power it cut her down in an instant. You didn’t even have the courage to be there when it did.”

Everyone in the room was watching now as Jason gave Lamprey a slight smile.

“It shows you as a man of character, putting aside personal animosities in the face of a greater threat,” Jason said, aggressively misrepresenting Lamprey’s intent. “I’m glad that such a man can come here today and put aside old problems, that we might face the new ones together.”

He took Lamprey’s hand, solemnly shaking it. “We appreciate your commiserations, Director. I believe your deputy was just saying that you have to go, which is understandable. A man of your position has so many calls on his time. We do thank you for coming, though.”

Pochard Finn rapidly stepped up as fury crossed Lamprey’s face, ready to erupt. Emir also moved alongside Finn, discretely using his aura at close proximity to squash Lamprey’s impending outburst.

“Thank you, Director Lamprey, Deputy Director Finn,” Emir said as he and Finn ushered lamprey to the door. On the other side, Emir’s staff helped Finn guide Lamprey out of sight as Emir returned, the door closing behind him.

“See?” Danielle said to Rufus. “I told you from the start; the boy has a political mind.”

Lamprey was the last of the socially obligated attendees to leave by far. In the wake of his departure, sombre, controlled expressions gave way to real emotion as the wake truly began. The drinks flowed, eyes grew damp and there was even some laughter as stories were shared.

One group of attendees was a team of iron-rankers, looking nervous at the preponderance of high-ranking people around them. It wasn't just no-name silvers of a provincial city, either. Their host, Emir Bahadir, was drinking with Thalia Mercer and the time witch, Danielle Geller. Constance, the famously unyielding head of Emir's extensive organisation, was disconcertingly expressive as she casually chatted with Gabriel and Arabella Remore. Even after years at Remore Academy, the iron-rankers were intimidated by Instructor Gabriel.

The iron rankers were a team from Vitesse, having trained at the Remore academy. Gabriel had discovered them when they were shipping out and had been the one to invite them to the memorial and wake. They had come up through the academy a few years behind Rufus, the Remore family's own prodigy whose presence had loomed over the other students.

Just the auras flowing around the room were enough to disconcert, even to those with years of aura training. There were a few other iron-rankers who were seemingly calm under the pressure, except for the one man who disregarded it entirely. They watched him swan about like he owned the place, for all the world as if the potent aura soup wasn't there. He walked up to legends and spoke to them like they were normal people. Even more startling was that they didn't seem to look down on the iron-ranker at all, welcoming him into their conversations.

"Nate, who is that?" Lance asked. Lance was an elf and the leader of the team. His long, light brown hair was cinched back behind his head.

"The outworlder we heard about," the leonid, Natalie, told him. "Asano."

Natalie was a female leonid and, like others of her kind, was smaller than males like Gary.

"He's the one Rufus has been training?" Maximilian asked. He was a member of the rare draconian race, larger even than male leonids and covered in glossy scales. His were the colour of dark leaves, green moving into purple.

"That's what I've been hearing," Natalie told him.

"What kind of training?" Oscar asked. He was a handsome celestine with dark skin and matching silver in his eyes and hair. "The aura training at the academy didn't teach us to handle auras that well."

The last member of the group was a smoulder with the typical midnight skin and burning-ember eyes. Her hair was cropped extremely short. She had her gaze locked on Jason as the others talked.

"Farrah also trained him?" she asked.

Frowning at her friend's intensity, Natalie nodded. The smoulder strode out from the group in his direction.

"Padma!" Lance called out under his breath but she ignored him.

Jason spotted the smoulder girl marching across the room like a woman on a mission. She couldn't have been any older than Humphrey, probably younger. She was the one he had been told about, coming at him with emotion storming through her aura. A Remore Academy graduate should have better control but the girl was clearly in turmoil. When she reached Jason it was like the wind dropped out of her sails, leaving her standing in front of him, becalmed.

"Padma?" he asked softly. She nodded and he gave her a gentle smile.

"I'm Jason Asano. How about we get you away from these obnoxious auras and have a chat?"

He didn't wait for a response before sweeping off, picking up two glasses and a bottle as she meekly followed him to a quiet corner of the room. Jason slowly teased Padma's story out of her as she clutched the glass of sweet liqueur in her hands like a talisman. Jason kept it refreshed from the bottle as she talked. She was hesitant at first, but with sympathetic prompting from Jason, the words were soon pouring out of her.

Padma and her team had trained at Remore Academy, a few years behind Rufus. He graduated ahead of them but his presence at the academy hardly lessened, a symbol for the students that came after. When he first brought back his team, Rufus had sought Padma out, who didn't even realise Rufus knew who she was. Rufus' new team member, Farrah, had the same essences as Padma and Rufus had introduced them. Farrah took the young smoulder under her wing, becoming something of a mentor.

Jason listened with no more than a few nods and words of acknowledgement to show his attentiveness. He quickly realised that Farrah had been more than just a mentor to Padma. Farrah had been her idol, a source of inspiration and a guiding hand. Padma had been eagerly awaiting her return to Vitesse, proud of her successful induction into the Adventurer's Society while Rufus and his team had been far away in Greenstone.

Padma had been looking forward to a reunion where she could share her pride, only for news to come of Farrah's death. When Emir's call went out for adventurers she didn't hesitate. Each berth on the ships bringing people over was a prize, Emir's people organising tournaments to bring the best. Despite her inexperience, her team supported her and won through. She wasn't even certain in herself why she had to go, but she felt driven, compelled by some internal need she didn't fully understand.

After she finished her story, Jason nodded. He shared a little of his own experience of learning from Farrah, leading to an exchange of what her mentorship had been like. Jason could plainly see that Padma had weeks of bottled-up frustration, aching to get out. He methodically used questions and little anecdotes to poke holes for it to vent out.

They sat in the corner talking for more than an hour before the speeches began. Rufus and Gary gave short speeches; anecdotes now smoothly-honed in the retelling. Jason got up to speak last. Stepping out in front of the group. His eyes lingered on Farrah's parents, who he had come to know over the last few days. Farrah's mother gave him a sad, encouraging nod.

"I've known Farrah since the day I came into this world," he said, then frowned. "That's was roughly half a year ago; not when I was a baby or something. I think everyone here knows my whole thing."

"Stop talking about yourself, you dinkle," Gary called out getting a round of laughs.

"I'm setting a scene, you hairy goon," Jason shot back. "I'm building up a narrative."

"Build faster," Gary said. "I don't want to sober up while you're prattling on."

"Maybe if I don't keep getting interrupted. Where was I?"

"You're very sad, the end," Gary said. "Let's drink more."

"That's enough out of you," Jason said, jabbing a finger in his direction. "Right, so, I met Farrah on the worst day of my life. I had no idea of where I was, what was happening or even if I was in my right mind. My first encounter with real power was when she blasted lava across the room like that was a normal thing that can happen. And that was Farrah; unassumingly awesome."

He looked down, smiling in reminiscence.

"After that, she introduced me to the world. Rufus taught me to fight like an adventurer and Gary taught me to move like one. Farrah, though, she taught me to *be* an adventurer. How to look at the world around me, literally and figuratively. I have a habit of running my mouth before my brain gets going and long before I have any idea what I'm talking about. Farrah was the one who brought me crashing down to earth before I let what I didn't know get me killed."

He looked up and around at the gathering.

"We all know that she died like an adventurer," he said. "There are people in this room who wouldn't be if she hadn't stood tall in the face of the most terrible enemy. The monstrosity that cut her down, his time will come, but this isn't about him. It isn't even about adventuring, really. At least, not for me."

Jason paused to sip at the drink in his hand.

“Yes, she taught me,” he continued. “Yes, I fought with her. By which I mean that I stood around while she blew up an apocalypse monster. It seemed very involving, in the moment. But most of my time with Farrah wasn’t as a fledgling adventurer. It was as a friend. The big moments are the tales we’ll retell but it’s the little ones I look back on and smile. Sitting around as Farrah and Clive talked some theoretical nonsense over everyone’s head. Farrah and Gary teaming up on Rufus because he’s gotten too stodgy. Sharing a meal, or an afternoon in the park. The adventures will be the stories we tell, but the friendship is the thing we’ll miss. To Farrah. Our friend.”

He raised his glass and everyone did the same.

“That is where I was going to leave it,” Jason said. “When Rufus told me to speak last tonight, I was reluctant. But he said that it should be me. That the last word should be one of legacy which, like it or not, I’m a big part of. It was convincing enough to get me up here, but this evening I met a young woman with at least as much claim to that as I. She hasn’t prepared any words, but I’ve seen for myself that she has them inside here, ready to go.”

Padma was listening to Jason with dawning horror. Smoulders were physically incapable of turning white, but she had at least gone a shade of very dark brown.

“Padma,” Jason said. “Please come over. The last word is yours.”

Everyone followed Jason’s gaze to the girl trying hard to look like a nondescript piece of furniture.

“You have things to say and I’ve already heard you say them well,” Jason told her. “They’re worth sharing.”

She stayed rooted on the spot until Gabriel’s voice pierced through the room with practised authority.

“Cadet Padma Parsell,” he said with the projection of a theatre veteran. “Front and centre.”

Padma’s body moved, Instructor Gabriel’s voice triggering a conditioned obedience. She found herself standing next to Jason, in front of the assembled high-rankers. Jason gave her a smile and an encouraging pat on the shoulder before moving off.

She started speaking. It was hesitant, with a staccato rhythm as her nervousness had her pausing and losing track of what she was saying. As she continued it became smoother, nervousness washed away by passion. It wasn’t a great speech but no one in the room doubted her love and sincerity. Jason stepped in just before she started to flounder.

“There we are,” he said. “Passion has an eloquence that transcends words and I think we can agree that none of us will top the passion of this young lady. So let the words be done and we can do what Farrah would do: get hammered on Emir’s expensive booze.”

After the speeches, the real drinking started in earnest. Farrah’s parents, Amelia and William, took Jason aside to thank him for his words.

“Farrah said you could be good with words,” William said. “A little too good, she told us. Likely to get yourself into trouble.”

“She talked about me?”

Farrah’s parents lived in the town Farrah grew up in, albeit in a much larger house, courtesy of Farrah’s adventurer earnings. There were no water-link speaking chambers there, but they had travelled to Vitesse every month to speak to their daughter.

“She certainly did talk about you,” Amelia said. “We weren’t sure quite what to expect from her description, though.”

“You should know that she thought you had an incredible potential,” William said.

“If you could learn to get out of your own way,” Amelia added. “I think she’d want that pointed out.”

“It does sound like her,” Jason said. “I’m so sorry she’s gone.”

“We always knew there was a chance this would happen,” Amelia said. “That was something we accepted when we first started working to get those essences for her.”

“Doesn’t make it hurt less,” William said. “But we were at least a little prepared for it.” Jason nodded.

“What about your family?” Amelia asked. “Farrah explained your situation to us, which seems a little unusual, even by adventurer standards.”

“I’m not sure,” Jason said. “I don’t know if they think I’m dead or missing. I make recordings for them, for if I ever get home. When I get home.”

Jason suddenly frowned.

“I’m sorry, but something just occurred to me. I’ll leave you to the condolence of others. Again, I’m so sorry.”

Jason made his way over to where Rufus and Gary were speaking with Clive, leaving Farrah’s parents seeking out Padma to speak with her.

“I just had a thought,” Jason said to Rufus, Gary and Clive. “Farrah’s parents were asking about my own parents and I thought of something. I got here because of Landemere Vane, and you think he was getting some kind of advanced astral magic from the Builder, right Clive?”

“It’s a possibility,” Clive said. “What he was doing wouldn’t get you home, though. It only served as an accidental catalyst for much larger, natural forces, though.”

“But what was he trying to summon?” Jason asked. “Something from the Builder’s world in the astral? That’s interdimensional travel. Landemere’s knowledge might not have the answers, but it could have clues.”

“All his notes and writings were taken by the church of Purity,” Rufus said. “They would be impossible to get a hold of, even if they weren’t destroyed.”

“You’ll also need to up your knowledge of astral magic theory if you ever want to understand them,” Clive said. “Skill books won’t be close to enough.”

“But they’ll be a start,” Jason said. “They bestow whatever knowledge was put into them, and I got those books from Landemere Vane himself. Even if they don’t have something that might help me get home, they might have something that helps us against the Builder.”

“You can’t use them until you hit bronze-rank though,” Gary said. “That’ll be months.”

“Oh, there are ways around that,” Clive said. “They’re a little rough, but we can look into it after Emir’s event.”

“Alright, then,” Jason said. “It’s a plan.”

Chapter 152: I Can't Trust Any of It

A crowd of hundreds was gathered at the Adventure Society campus, in front of the cloud palace as they waited for Emir to emerge. There was a sea of iron rankers, plus all manner of city luminaries and others all eager to witness the commencement of Emir's grand event. Along with the mystery surrounding it, finally on the cusp of giving out answers, many were looking for a change of pace. Ever since the expedition, a pall had been hanging over the city's adventurers and the major families to which they belonged.

Emir's contest offered danger as well as opportunity. Many Greenstone families had taken the expedition as a lesson and were not allowing their scions to participate. After the results of the last astral space incursion, they were unwilling to throw people into another. With an enigmatic enemy targeting astral spaces for unknown reasons, the idea of sending their most inexperienced members into another one gave many families pause.

Not every family took safety as the highest priority, however. The inquiry had been sweeping with the demotions and the most affected families were desperate for ways to snatch back their lost prestige. While the astral space expedition had technically been a success, having excised the problem that was affecting the astral space, many viewed it as a failure.

Most of Greenstone's major families had never cared about the expedition's actual objective, instead, seeing it as a chance for individual glory. With the massive losses sustained in the fighting retreat, from that perspective it was a failure. Emir's expedition was a chance for them to rewrite their image after the expedition.

Then there were those families who, like the Gellers, simply wanted the next adventure. They recognised that there was always danger, but that was the nature of the adventuring life. If their young people were ever going to be the equal of the Gellers or the visiting adventurers, they had to push themselves harder, confronting greater threats.

The iron-rankers in the crowd were divided into three general groups: the locals, the Gellers and the outsiders. Even with many local iron-rankers sitting out, the locals were the largest group. The Gellers were the smallest of the three groups, with seven teams participating, not including Humphrey and his team. The Gellers were mostly from distant lands, but the family's deep roots in Greenstone kept them from being true outsiders.

Humphrey's team wasn't counted due to being made up of locals, with even Humphrey himself being Greenstone born and raised. Only Jason was not local but he still counted as more of Greenstone local than he did anywhere else in the world.

The outsiders and the Gellers were throwing each other a lot of assessing glances, largely dismissive of the locals. The outsiders had answered Emir's call from many different lands, but competition had been fierce for a spot on the boats Emir had brought in. No one underestimated the abilities of those who had made it.

As for the Gellers, their high standards were known the world over. This was hammered home by the presence of Danielle Geller. The time witch was more famous than most gold-rankers and it was well known she was close to joining their ranks herself. Once she did, she would stand at the pinnacle of the adventuring world.

Amongst the visiting adventurer teams was the one who had attended Farrah's memorial and wake, although only four of the five were present. Like all the teams awaiting Emir's appearance, they were made up of people in mid-to-late teens. Less usual was the complete absence of humans from their team. The leader, Lance, was an elf whose swordsmanship relied as much on the finesse of his magic as the finesse of his hands. Like Jason, his preference was for flowing combat robes. He had fair skin and his light brown hair was cinched back practically behind his head.

Next to Lance was Padma, with the onyx skin and fiery eyes typical of her people. Also typical of her people were her heavy clothes as she was wholly unaffected by heat. The effect of the delta on the climate was to keep things hotter than elsewhere in the region, even as autumn moved closer to winter. To a smoulder, though, even the most scathing desert was as cool as a mild spring day.

The team healer, Oscar, was a celestine man whose handsomeness eclipsed even the elven team leader. The comparison was made all the stronger as he mirrored Lance's hairstyle by tying it back in a simple cinch. Of the same ethnicity as Sophie, he had chocolate skin with silver hair and eyes. His clothes were white, neat and fashionable in the Vitesse style that Rufus favoured. They were also adventure-ready, the combination of form and function speaking to their extravagance.

Standing with him was the tallest person currently in Greenstone, the only member of the draconian people present. Maximilian was an imposing figure with his size and long, hairless head. Instead of skin, his scales in dark shades of green and purple were glossy under the bright sun. His clothes were designed to show them off, little more than tasselled shoulder pads and a loincloth.

A human they didn't know was walking towards them, only for her appearance to change to that of a female leonid, their team member, Natalie. Compared to male leonids like Gary, the women were smaller, lithe and sleek, with shorter fur and facial features closer to that of humans, elves and celestines. In the case of Natalie, her lissom body was

attractive even to human eyes, her naturally sinuous movements exuding sultry like it was their job.

“Nate,” Lance greeted. “We were starting to wonder if you were going to turn up.”

“You’re the one who asked me to do some digging around,” Natalie said. “There was more to unearth than I expected.”

“Let’s start with our competition, then,” Lance said. “What do you have on the Gellers?”

“What you’d expect, mostly,” Natalie said. “Well-trained, well-resourced. Good team synergies.”

“Any stand-outs?”

“The ones to watch were apparently the team lead by a Rick Geller, but he’s had to rebuild the team after losing people. The big clash here with those people invading astral spaces. Lots of dead adventurers.”

“Like Farrah,” Padma said.

“Yes,” Natalie said. “This Geller team lost two people. The leader added his sister and a local to replace their losses but their team cohesion isn’t fully there yet. They had to change most of their methods for the new composition.”

“What about locals?” Lance asked.

“Worse than you would expect, even for an out of the way place like this. Only one team is considered to be competitive.”

“How competitive?” Lance asked.

“Enough that the Geller teams consider them a real contender. They had a mock battle with the team I was just talking about and another team led by a Geller. Danielle Geller’s son.”

“Humphrey Geller?” Lance asked.

“That’s right,” Natalie said. “He’s just recently put together a team of locals instead of using his family members and connections.”

“Interesting,” Lance said. “I chatted with Humphrey a little bit at the wake, but we didn’t talk business. I know him a little from when his mother brought him out to Vitesse a few times but that was before either of us were essence users. I don’t even know what his essences are.”

“His confluence is the dragon essence,” Natalie said.

Maximilian gave an unhappy groan.

“False dragon,” he complained. Draconians took pride in their claimed dragon ancestry and often had issues with other races wielding the dragon essence. Maximilian had the dragon essence himself.

“Don’t start with that again,” Oscar said.

“I’m not starting anything,” Maximilian said unhappily. “He just shouldn’t go around acting like he has true draconic power.”

“Max, he’s not claiming to actually be a dragon,” Oscar said. “Not any more than Lance, with his sword essence, is claiming to be an actual sword.”

“How well do you know this Humphrey?” Natalie asked Lance.

“Just in passing, socially. I’m surprised to hear his mother let him make a team of locals, though. I can’t imagine she would let him add just any local idiot to his team.”

“Oh, he didn’t add just any local idiot,” Natalie said. “From what I hear, this idiot is special. Trying to make sense of the things I heard about the guy was crazy. I still don’t know how much of it is true.”

“Who is he?” Lance asked.

“Padma’s new friend,” Natalie said. “Jason Asano; the one Farrah was helping train with Rufus.”

“Jason?” Padma asked, startled. “He was really nice. Other than putting me up in front of everyone like that.”

“Well, the things I’ve heard about your new friend are pretty wild. Some people are scared of him, others think he’s an idiot or a madman. Some have even called him a genius, working his way up the social hierarchy. He ended up on Humphrey Geller’s team, after all.”

“What’s your assessment?” Lance asked Natalie.

“I honestly have no idea,” Natalie said. “Either most of what I’ve heard is false, which would make sense, or the man is some kind of insane magic pixie. Remember at the wake, the local Magic Society director getting drunk and confronting him? Apparently, there’s some kind of feud there, where Asano somehow came out on top.”

“What would an iron-ranker be feuding with a Magic Society director over?” Padma asked. “And how would he win?”

“Word is, it was over an indentured servant,” Natalie said, “which brings us to the next thing. You remember that commotion last week before the big meeting?”

“That was over an indentured servant,” Oscar said. “I can see why, having seen her myself. An arresting woman.”

“That was Asano,” Lance realised, thinking back. “Didn’t Bahadir kick him off the cloud palace for that? They seemed friendly during the wake.”

“That whole incident was a ruse,” Natalie explained. “Turns out it was some kind of plan to bait these astral invaders. I’m not sure on the details but it apparently worked.”

“It sounds like Jason is in the middle of a lot,” Padma said.

“That was my impression,” Natalie said. “I came across to many conflicting stories about him, though. There was apparently some kind of rivalry with the Adventure Society director, but she promoted him to three stars anyway. I heard he spent months healing the poor for free. I also heard he went a dozen to one with a bunch of adventurers in a shopping arcade in the middle of the day, killing half of them. I even heard he’s an outworlder.”

“That sounds made up,” Oscar said. “You can’t just kill a bunch of adventurers.”

“Twelve against one is even less plausible,” Maximilian said.

“The locals are sub-standard,” Natalie said. “Any of us could probably go twelve against one. Apparently, there’s a recording of the people going at him first, so self-defence. I’ve heard about a few recordings of the guy floating around, including that mock battle they mentioned. He’s apparently really big on recording crystals.”

“You’re right,” Padma said. “He’s using one right now.”

She had spotted Jason, some distance away in the crowd as he spoke into a recording crystal floating in front of him. She waved in Jason’s direction, the man next to him spotting her and pointing her out. He waved back with a friendly grin.

“So, what’s your take on the guy?” Lance asked Natalie.

“Unpredictable and dangerous,” she said. “I didn’t want to spend the whole time investigating one guy, so I decided it was best if you and Padma went and asked Rufus Remore,” she said. “You two know him better than the rest of us.”

“Did you hear how he came to have Rufus and Farrah’s teaching him?” Padma asked. “When I brought it up last night he just said that they found him out in the desert, lost and confused.”

“Form what I found out, that’s a very incomplete explanation,” Natalie said. “Not that what I heard was any more likely. I was told that Asano saved Rufus’ team from getting killed before Asano was even an essence user.”

“That doesn’t sound likely,” Maximilian said.

“As I said, the things I’ve been hearing about the guy are wild. Enough of it was so obviously false that I can’t trust any of it.”

“What about the rest of Humphrey’s team?” Lance asked.

"It's an unusual bunch," Natalie said. "One is a Magic Society official. He's some kind of astral magic expert who has apparently been instrumental in finding out about these astral invaders."

"And he's an iron-ranker?"

"Yeah, but he's apparently the real thing. The locals have been digging out information the big Adventure Society branches have been keeping under wraps and I've heard this guy is a key reason."

"What kind of secrets?" Lance asked.

"Not sure yet," Natalie said. "I've got a better chance of prying out secrets here than back home, though, once we're finished with whatever Bahadir has in store."

"Who else is on Humphrey's team?" Lance asked.

"There's some local, minor nobility. Nothing remarkable that I found from a quick check around. I've heard he's a solid healer but not much else. The last member is that indentured servant we were talking about."

"Really?" Oscar asked, edging forward with curiosity.

"An adventurer is an indentured servant?" Lance asked.

"Seems she was some kind of thief. She was robbing the local nobility for months but no one could catch her. Until Asano did, then went and made her an adventurer after claiming her indenture."

"Why would he do that?" Padma asked.

"You'll have to ask him that yourself. I heard a lot of postulation, most of it fairly disgusting."

"That's weird," Lance said. "Who makes their indentured servant an adventurer?"

"A smart man with a gorgeous indentured servant," Oscar said. "That's the kind of gratitude that does some real work."

"See?" Natalie asked. "Fairly disgusting."

"Jason, that team you waved at is talking about you," Beth said.

"You can hear them from over here?" Jason asked. "Is that an elf ears thing?"

"No!" Beth said, raising her hands to her ears in a gesture of self-reassurance. "It's an essence power thing. What's wrong with my ears?"

"Nothing," Jason said, his eyes on the distant team. "Is that what female leonids look like? I hope this doesn't awaken anything in me."

"What are you talking about?" Neil asked.

"I don't like what's happening in my head," Jason said. "Am I a furry now? I don't want to be a furry."

"Why would you be furry?" Clive asked.

"I'm not above exploring new things," Jason said. "I just don't have time to work on the costumes. Making them, cleaning them, dear gods. Maybe Jory has something that could help."

"Is any of this making sense to you?" Beth asked, looking at Jason's team.

"Best not to ask," Neil said. "You learn that lesson quick"

"I bet it's a sex thing," Sophie said. "It's a sex thing, isn't it?"

"Uh... no," Jason said.

"Who are they?" Niko asked. The smoulder member of Beth's team, he was looking at Padma. "She looks sad. Should I go see if she needs comforting?"

Beth slapped the back of his head.

"Don't be a sleaze," she scolded.

"How am I the sleazy one?" Niko asked. "Jason has a sexy slave girl."

"I don't have Sophie," Jason said. "That's just a necessary legal fiction."

"Damn right, you don't," Sophie said.

"Unless I want to," Jason said.

"Do you want a slap too?" Sophie asked.

"Would you think less of me if I said yes?" Jason said. "My safe word is munificent."

"You are impossible to deal with," Sophie said.

"I told you he was the sleazy one," Niko said.

"Could everyone just act with a little decorum?" Humphrey asked.

"That would be excellent," Beth agreed.

"Humphrey, you really put together the wrong team for that," Neil said.

"Everyone quiet," Clive said. "Emir's coming out."

Chapter 153:

Legacy

Emir and Constance were walking toward the cloud palace main exit.

“Who did the voice projection circle?” Emir asked.

“Trent,” Constance said.

“Do you mean ‘the glass definitely won’t break’ Trent or ‘can’t hold up a fish’ Trent?”

“We’re not calling him that,” Constance admonished. “It was a suppurating grease fish. No one could have held it up.”

“Elsbeth Arella could have,” Emir said. “We should have gotten her fired so we could hire her ourselves.”

Constance shook her head in weary exasperation.

“You need to stop doing that.”

“Danielle wanted me to do it.”

“We stay hands-off in local politics,” Constance said. “That’s your policy.”

“It seems warranted, here.”

“It always does to you, which is why you put me in charge of not letting you.”

“We’re already neck-deep, with this astral space business.”

“That’s not local politics,” Constance said. “It’s international politics. Interdimensional, if Standish is to be believed.”

“Clive,” Emir said with a sigh. “I can’t believe Jason snaked him out from under us.”

“That is exactly how you described your own recruitment attempt.”

“He’s a good lad, Asano.”

“It wouldn’t have worked, you know,” Constance said.

“Oh, I reckon we could have won him over. He’s wasted in this backwater.”

“No, I mean the fish,” Constance said. “Arella actually couldn’t have held it. Suppurating grease fish oil is resistant to telekinesis.”

“It is?”

“That’s why we went to so much trouble to find it.”

“I thought we were just going to cook it.”

“You thought we spent three weeks, using over a dozen people to find and catch a very specific and hard to find fish just so we could eat it?”

“No,” Emir said unconvincingly. “What did we want it for again?”

“The Rimaros job.”

“Oh, right. Where we dug that tunnel through the bottom of the floating island and slipped out with the... what were we stealing again?”

“We weren’t stealing,” Constance said. “We were repatriating the royal ceremonial armour of Kodin.”

“Right, yes. That ridiculous armour that looked like someone inflated it. I’m surprised they even wanted it back.”

“It has cultural importance to the people of Kodin,” Constance said.

“It felt like stealing. Did they figure out it was us?”

“They did,” Constance said. “Greg didn’t get the mango cart in place in time. On the bright side, they couldn’t admit they had the armour in the first place, so everyone’s pretending it didn’t happen.”

“Right,” Emir said, nodding. “‘Not enough mangoes’ Greg.”

“No, that was ‘fruit cart’ Greg. We got rid of ‘not enough mangoes’ Greg after what he was caught doing to those hairless oxen.”

“That was him? Good riddance, then. We lost a bundle cleaning that mess up. What happened to him?”

“We released him to the local authorities. Have you ever considered not basing your hiring policies on getting people with the same name?” Constance asked.

“I tried that in the early days,” Emir said. “People are much more resistant to nicknames when there’s no one else with the same name as them.”

“Are the nicknames an essential part of the operation?”

“Why do you think I do all this?” Emir asked.

“Money, power, travel, excitement and connections.”

“Those are the tawdry goals of the weak,” Emir said loftily. “We gold-rankers strive for higher purpose.”

“I think you’ve been spending too much time with Jason. You’re talking increasing amounts of rubbish.”

They reached the exit and started walking across the cloud bridge to the shore where the iron-rankers and other attendees were assembled next to the reception building.

“Is everyone out of the palace?” Emir asked as they surveyed the crowd of adventurers.

“We’re the last,” Constance said. “It’s ready to change over.”

At the end of the platform, in front of where everyone had assembled was a faintly glowing ritual circle. After he and Constance stepped off the cloud bridge, Emir reached into his jacket and pulled out a large, round-bottomed flask. He shook the flask, then took

out the stopper, releasing four streams of mist that each took different shapes. One looked like a house, another like a large vehicle. The third was a small replica of the cloud palace, while the fourth was a ship. Emir put his hand through the mist ship and the four images returned to the flask. As he put the flask back into his dimensional jacket, the cloud palace slowly started to warp out of shape.

Emir turned from the palace which was beginning the process of turning back into a cloud ship. He stepped into the glowing ritual circle and began to speak.

“Greetings, fellow adventurers,” he said, the magic circle projecting his voice over the crowd. “As you all know, I have come to this fine city with a purpose. Many, I’m sure, have heard whispers and rumours, but today, all shall be laid bare. Centuries ago, there was an ancient order of assassins. Known and feared the world over, their enemies came together to scour them from the face of our world. Today, only hidden remnants can be found, and those only with time and effort. Myself and others have undertaken that time and effort, which brings us to today.”

He panned his gaze over the crowd.

“This order of assassins was known as the Order of the Reaper. Going all the way back to the days of their organisation was wiped out, there have been legends of a legacy they left behind. Of a test, for those with the potential to receive this legacy. For years now, I have been seeking that legacy, and finally, I have found it. In the days before this city was founded, the last fortress of the order was hidden away in what was then a remote and unpopulated region.”

Not everyone had their full attention on Emir as the cloud palace deformed behind his back in the transition from grand residence to ocean-going vessel.

“As you have no doubt surmised,” Emir continued, “the purpose for which you have been gathered is to claim this legacy. The ancient, hidden fortress is now in ruins, but the true heart of the complex remains unpenetrated. It lies within an astral space of its own, waiting for those brave and skilled enough to face the trials within. This is no ordinary astral space aperture, however. To protect their secrets the Order had it sealed, the means of opening it scattered across the world. Those means have now been gathered and the aperture is ready to be opened. The trials are ready to begin.”

He made a sweeping gesture, taking in the crowd.

“Just from the fact that I have gathered you all here, you have all certainly realised that things are not so simple as I have described. Even once opened, the aperture still comes with restrictions, for within lies the true test. A series of trials left by the Order of the Reaper. Tests, to see who can live up to their ideals. Only those with the most untapped

potential, iron-rankers, may enter. The first of those to pass every trial will receive the legacy left behind. As a warning, the trials shall remain open for eighteen days, after which they will again seal themselves closed. Any of you who have not returned by then will not return at all.”

Emir took an object from his jacket and held it in front of him. Above his head, a large image of a gold and black scythe appeared.

“No one knows the full extent of the order’s legacy. What we do know is that it includes this object. It is the ancient symbol of the order and the object of years of searching. The goal for each of you is to bring me this item. Anything else you find in that place, part of the order’s legacy or not, is yours to keep. Additionally, whichever team brings the scythe to me will receive five legendary awakening stones, which you may be chosen freely from my stores. If you are a team of one, then all five shall belong to you. Beyond the stones, however, is another prize.”

Emir gestured behind him, where the cloud palace was still deforming.

“My cloud palace is a wonder, but it did not come to me as you see it here. It is a growth item I had the good fortune to come across when I, like you now, was only an iron ranker. Many years later I came across the man who created it, a diamond ranker. In payment for a service rendered, he gave me a second one, still at iron rank. Whomsoever brings me the scythe will receive it for themselves.”

A susurrus of noise rippled through the crowd. The cloud palace had been dominating the skyline of the Adventure Society skyline for weeks. Every person assembled wanted to claim one.

“So, you all now know what you are here for. Once the cloud palace has returned to the form of a ship all the iron-rankers participating may come aboard to see it for themselves. We will sail along the coastline to the closest location to our objective and travel overland from there. Our destination is one the locals may know of: Sky Scar Lake. The ruins are at the bottom of the lake, which is very deep, so you have until my ship leaves in four hours to prepare for that dive. Consider it your first challenge. Be here and ready to board at that time.”

Emir stepped out of the speaking circle. People immediately tried to approach but a portal appeared next to him, which he stepped through with Constance before it vanished.

The crowd was thrown into turmoil as Emir finished his speech. Some were being exhorted by their family elders to obtain a cloud palace at any cost. Others were already

dashing in the direction of the trade hall, looking for items to let them handle the water of the lake.

Jason and Beth's teams were caught up in the swirl of people pushing their way out of the crowd.

"Does your team have a way of getting through the lake?" Beth asked once they were free.

Jason nodded. "There's a ritual I know. I assume you do too, Clive."

"I know the one you're talking about. I'd have to look it up, though."

"I can do it, no worries," Jason said, then turned back to Beth. "What about you?"

"I have the water essence," she said. "One of my abilities will do the job."

"I guess we'll make some final preparations and see you in a few hours, then."

Many people were eager to get aboard the cloud palace, now transformed back into a ship the size of an ocean liner. Boarding did not go as smoothly as planned for some when it was revealed that a requirement of participation was a simple aura test. Anyone whose aura didn't match the Adventure Society records from prior to the expedition was excluded. Only a handful of people were caught out like this but were vocal in their protests. Instead of being heard out, however, they were taken away for closer examination.

On the ship, Jason's team were given their own cabins, alongside those assigned to Rufus, Gary and Farrah's parents. Rufus' parents were staying in Greenstone, making discrete inquiries into the church of Purity. Their teammate, Cal, had already left to check out the Landemere estate. The bulk of the iron-rankers were all bunked together in crew dorms, while the actual crew enjoyed cabins like Emir's guests.

As with the guest wing when it had been a cloud palace, the ship had a guest lounge with access to a broad side-deck. Humphrey quickly went off to invite their friends out of the press of people domiciled together below decks, bringing back Rick and Beth's teams. He also brought along Lance and his team as well.

"Mose!" Jason greeted happily. "It's been a while. What's up, mate?"

"Beth finally let me in her team," Mose said happily. "I think she wanted some extra power after you beat her like that."

Mose Cavendish was Beth's cousin, who Jason had known longer than Beth. They had met on a mission to escort spirit coins, where Jason had witnessed the destructive power of Mose's spells.

"That wasn't me," Jason said. "You can blame Humphrey for that one. He's predicted exactly how your cousin would react if we could put her on the back foot."

Rufus and Gary soon joined them and the group socialised as the ship sailed its way south down the coast. It was only a few hours before it sailed into shore at an unremarkable patch of desert. Emir's people started unloading sand barges from the ship. None were the size of the great Ustei tribe barge, but three of them were enough to transport the whole group inland to Sky Scar Lake.

It was hours more, going into the night by the time the barges arrived at the lake, vast almost to the point of an inland sea. It was a vast oasis in the desert, a blessed eye of blue and green in the hard, yellow face of the desert. The lights of villages situated all around the shore of the lake shone in the early dark. There were towns and villages situated all around the lake and the sand barges disembarked their charges at the largest.

The adventurers were gathered and notified that they would begin in the morning. The townsfolk had been warned ahead of time about the coming influx and had beds for those who wanted them or food and drink for those who didn't. Emir brought out the cloud palace again, right on the surface of the lake, allowing selected people to use that for accommodation.

The next day, the locals set out tables and brought out food and drink en masse to feed the anxious horde of adventurers. Not even the elite adventurers from overseas were immune to the nervousness. For all their training and prestige, they were still iron rankers and, coming from high-magic regions, they didn't have the individual monster hunting experience of the locals.

Some didn't eat out of nervousness while others couldn't wolf down food. Humphrey walked around with Neil, Sophie and Belinda.

"Next time you'll be an adventurer, too," Sophie told Belinda.

"Very likely," Humphrey said. "An astral space untouched for centuries will likely have accumulated a good number of essences and awakening stones. If we're lucky, they'll be unusual ones, although that's down to the nature of the astral space."

"People don't talk about it much, because of how it went," Neil said, "but the expedition was quite a good haul."

"That's how Jason got you so many awakening stones on the open market," Humphrey said to Sophie. "Did you see him leave this morning?"

"I saw him duck out early with Clive," Sophie said.

"Is that them there?" Belinda asked, pointing. The others followed her gaze to see Clive and Jason behind some kind of cooking stall in aprons. There was a line of people leading up to them as they rapidly worked a large grill plate in front of them. Jason was

wearing some kind of puffy white hat and his aprons had the words 'you can't fight monsters on an empty stomach' emblazoned on it.

"Oh, hey!" Jason called out as he spotted their approach. "Clive is teaching me to barbecue eels properly!"

Chapter 154: A Rash Decision

“Now,” Jason said happily, “this is what adventuring should be like.”

Adventurers were spreading out over the surface of Sky Scar Lake like a huge flock of geese, using all manner and means of transportation. There was a wild array of essence abilities, rituals and items from water-walking books to cloaks that let the wearer swim like a manta ray. Jason himself had a useful item he had acquired from the tidal troll he defeated.

Item: [Necklace of the Deep] (iron rank, uncommon)

A necklace containing the power of the deep ocean giants (jewellery, necklace).

- Effect: Ignore the effects of high pressure and pressure variance.
- Effect: Breathe water.
- Effect: Your weight is increased. You cannot use iron-rank weight reduction abilities or items.

Jason could use it to walk along the bottom of the lake but his team couldn't, so it was staying in his inventory. It was nice to have on hand, though, and he could always test it out later.

His team were near the edge of the shore, a few of hundreds making their way into or onto the lake, depending on individual methods. They were geared up and ready, Jason's starlight cloak already in place, which he was beginning to regret.

“Nice cloak,” an adventurer said to him. “How much to buy it off you?”

“It's an ability,” Jason said. “Can't sell it.”

“He's lying, Brandon,” a second adventurer said. She was plastered to Brandon's side. “He just doesn't want to sell it to you.”

“Come on, how much?” Brandon asked.

“It really is an ability,” Jason insisted.

“Guy, you do not want to mess with me,” Brandon said. “Just sell me the damn cloak. Do you have any idea who my father is?”

Standing next to Jason, Neil winced, pinching the bridge of his nose. The cloak vanished from around Jason.

“See?” Jason said. “All gone.”

The cloak reappeared.

“It’s an ability,” Jason reiterated. “Try an awakening stone of the stars; that where I got it.”

“Forget this guy,” Brandon’s hanger-on said and Brandon nodded.

“Neil, your new teammate is a rolling turd wagon,” Brandon said and they hurried off to catch up with their team. The girl slapped Brandon on the arm for eyeing Sophie as they went. Neil and Humphrey let out a sigh of relief.

“You know that guy?” Clive asked Neil.

“One of Thadwick’s peripheral hangers-on,” Neil said. “His family are want-to-be aristocrats and he’s the dregs of the bloodline. If his family knew he not only failed to recognise Humphrey but mouthed off in front of him, they’d drown him in this lake.”

“I’m just grateful Jason didn’t take the bait,” Humphrey said.

“Farrah tried to hammer into my head that I should only start trouble when trouble is what I want.”

“Since when do you ever not want trouble?” Sophie asked.

“You’ve been listening to other people too much,” Jason said. “When did you ever see me start trouble?”

“You killed a bunch of people in a shopping arcade in the middle of the day!”

“I didn’t start that,” Jason said.

“He’s right,” Neil said. “Thadwick sent them to kill him when he panicked over Jason uncovering his lumber mill scam. Dustin and I didn’t find out until later, so by the time we went to Thadwick’s father to stop it, Jason had already killed them and given a recording of him doing it to Thadwick’s mother.”

“Some guy tried to have you killed and you just let that go?” Sophie asked. “If you let that go, what’s to stop him from trying again.”

“I would have liked to deal with him at the time,” Jason said, “but there were mitigating circumstances. Even disregarding the power of his family, I wasn’t going to kill my girlfriend’s brother.”

“Wait,” Sophie said. “That Cassandra girl’s brother tried to kill you?”

“He did,” Jason said. “It was a rash decision.”

“Does he have a weird sister thing or something?” Sophie asked.

“Not that I know of,” Jason said. “Neil?”

“No,” Neil said. “Thadwick isn’t the greatest guy in the world, but he isn’t that kind of creepy.”

“That’s where the indignation comes in?” Jason asked. “We were just talking about how he tried to kill me.”

"I'm pretty sure you sleeping with his sister helped that decision along a little," Neil said.

"I eventually realised it's for the best," Jason said. "What would killing him get me? Killed by his Mum, that's what. Then Emir and Rufus come down on the Mercers."

"My family too," Humphrey said. "My mother and Lady Mercer are close, but Mother wouldn't tolerate her killing you."

"Exactly," Jason said. "The wheel doesn't stop turning until someone steps off and forgives and it might as well be me. Besides, Thadwick has problems enough to be going on with."

Thadwick had been in the constant company of Mercer family bronze-rankers since having the star seed purged out of him. They stood watch as he slept for days in recovery, then they stood by his room at his parents' 'suggestion' that he stay put and focus on getting better.

Although his rooms in the Mercer family home were the opposite of prison-like, he chafed at the confinement. His sister had visited, only to be chased-off by screamed accusations of whoring herself out to outworlder trash. His father would not tolerate such tantrums and had not been back since teaching that lesson with the back of his hand. His mother was more gentle but no less unyielding. She probed him with incessant questions until he told her to leave him to rest.

Thadwick's memories of his time with a star seed were hazy. His last clear thoughts were of being taken in the astral space and knocked out. From there it was only disconnected flashes; fleeting moments without context or comprehension. Clarity only came when he woke up out of recovery, the star seed removed.

His mother had told him that the others had experienced much the same. She wanted to know everything he could remember, everything he could piece together. She was meant to be his mother but instead giving him the things he wanted she pestered him again and again with questions. In the end, she was just one more person who only wanted something from him. Like everyone else, she was blinded by whatever strange methods Asano was using to make everyone love him.

She was so enamoured of that filthy, interdimensional bastard. She had made no secret of her plans to match him with Cassandra. At least the family had put an end to that sordid idea. The thought of his beautiful, capable sister being wasted on such a vile creature filled him with anger.

Everything had started going wrong the moment Asano appeared. Showing him up in front of everyone at the field assessment gathering. Winning over the Gellers, the out-of-town big shots and even Thadwick's own mother. She once even had the gall to say that he could stand to be more like Asano.

Every step of the way, Asano was plotting to bring himself up by putting Thadwick down. He wormed his way into Cassandra's affections, just to rile him up. How long had Asano worked to uncover Thadwick's brilliant plan to show his father that he was ready to step up in running family affairs? Asano must have been looking for some way to undermine him from the moment he arrived in the city to figure it out.

Every since Asano's arrival in the city, Thadwick had been feeling increasingly powerless. The sheer magnitude of Asano's plotting was mind-boggling, and Thadwick was the only one smart enough to see through it. The only time he had felt powerful in months was in a handful of moments he didn't understand. The memories were scattered, but one thing had been present in all of them: an incredible sense of power.

His memories included a few faces and places he recognised. Scraps of conversation he hadn't told his mother when she was questioning him. He had a better use for those snatches of memory: he wanted that feeling of power back.

He got up and stripped out of the bedclothes he had been wearing throughout his confinement. He picked out some street clothes, yanked them on and marched out the door.

"Young master Mercer," one of the bronze-rankers said as Thadwick strode past.

"Your mother told us it would be best if you stayed in your rooms to rest," the other said.

"I've rested enough," Thadwick said, not stopping. One of the two followed him, the other going off in the other direction. As Thadwick reached the ground level and was just leaving the tower, his mother teleported in front of him, along with the guard that had gone to fetch her.

"Thadwick, dear," she said. Her sincerity might fool others but he saw right through it.

"I'm going out, mother. I've been cooped up long enough."

"I don't think that would be best," she said.

"Am I a prisoner in my own home?" he asked.

"Of course not, dear."

"Then I'm going out," he said firmly.

“Very well,” she said, having no way around his masculine confidence. “With so many out of the city things should be quiet, so now may be the best time. But Geoffrey and Kyle will be going with you.”

“Who?” Thadwick asked.

Thalia gestured to the guards that had been stationed on Thadwick’s room for weeks, the one that had followed him and the one that had fetched her.

“I need them with you,” she said. “To keep you safe.”

“Fine,” Thadwick said. He didn’t care what they would suffer where he was going.

Almost two hours later, Thadwick and his escorts were walking through the streets of Old City. Close to the fortress ruled by the Big Three, many establishments were offering the kind of very specific services only the wealthy could afford.

“I don’t think this is where your mother would like you to be, young master Mercer,” one of his guards said.

“You aren’t paid to think, Geoffrey.”

“I’m Kyle, young master.”

“I don’t care.”

Thadwick took a familiar path down some stairs to an unmarked basement shopfront. A slat opened up, the eyes behind it taking in Thadwick and his guards.

“You know better than to bring people wearing house colours here,” a voice came from behind the door. Thadwick’s guards were indeed clad in the uniform of the Mercer household.

“Take it up with my mother,” Thadwick said. “You don’t have the stones to keep that door closed in my face, so hurry up and open it.”

The eyes glared but moments later the door swung open. Thadwick smirked at the doorman as he went past, his guards trailing behind. After a short hallway was a large, luxurious lounge. There was a long bar and a variety of booths that offered convenient seclusion. The room was adorned with beautiful men and women in provocative clothes; elves and humans, celestines, smoulders and even a few burly male or lithe female leonids.

Thadwick’s guards drew attention but people quickly turned back to their own affairs. Thadwick glanced around and spotted the person he was looking for. An indolent man splayed in a booth with a woman to either side of him.

“Thadwick,” the man greeted him, glancing over the Mercer guards. “I see your mother let you out, so long as you wore your leash.”

“I knew you’d be here, Timos.”

“I take my pleasure where I can find it,” Timos said. “You can hardly blame me for being so good at looking for it.”

“We need to talk.”

“Then, by all means, take a seat.”

“You’ll want this little chat in private, Timos.”

“Oh? Finally learning to explore all the tantalising treats life has to offer, Taddy?”

Thadwick leaned in, grabbing the front of Timos’ clothes and whispering in his ear.

“I’ve been having these very interesting flashes of what I went through, Timos. Some faces I recognised when I was captured during the expedition. If you don’t want to talk about them, I bet my mother will.”

Thadwick stood back up, looking with satisfaction at the Timos’ face, the dismissive sneer wiped right off of it.

“What about your boys, here?” Timos asked.

“I don’t care what happens to them.”

With all the auras, abilities and magic items being used, the ambient magic had become turbid. Clive closed his eyes and took a slow, deep breath, sending out a wave of magical stillness that even those without magic perception abilities could feel.

-
- Party member [Clive Standish] has used [Mana Equilibrium].
 - Ambient magic has entered a harmonious state.

 - The next spell cast in this area will cost reduced mana, and the harmonious state will be disrupted.
-

“So handy,” Jason said. “Thank you, Clive.”

Jason quickly enacted the ritual whose circle had been inscribed into the flat top of a large, lacquered board, ideal for marking with inscriptions. After a short chant from Jason, a shimmering bubble appeared around the board. Humphrey reached through the bubble unimpeded, picked it the platform and dropped it onto the water. It didn’t strike the water, instead, stopping in the air over the surface. The water was visibly indented by the bubble.

The team all stepped into the bubble, onto the board which remained completely stable. It was a good-sized board, but it was standing room only with the five people on it. They watched as nearby, Beth’s team sailed off on a boat made of condensed water that somehow didn’t get the people in it wet.

“Maybe we should have used a bigger board,” Neil said.

“This as big as we can go before the ritual starts getting costly in materials,” Jason said. He concentrated on the board and it started floating slowly out onto the lake.

“Exactly right,” Clive said. “It may not be fast or big, but it will do what we need.”

They floated out, part of the mass of adventurers. Eventually, they found Rufus standing on the surface of the lake. On his feet were large, garish, blue boots, from which mist was drifting in wisps. He was directing people to descend to the bottom of the lake at that spot. He gave them an encouraging wave but didn't pause his task to speak with them. Jason directed the board to go down, the water enveloping their bubble as they descended into the lake.

Chapter 155: It's A Good One

Jason and his team descended through the water as the daylight shining through the surface of the lake above grew increasingly dim. They stood close together on the platform as the sphere around them held off the water, encapsulating them in a perfect orb. As it grew too murky for anyone but Jason to see, Humphrey took out a light crystal, tossing it up to float around his head. In the dark around them, other teams took similar steps. The result was a rain of light, plunging down through watery depths.

"This is awesome," Jason said, looking at the lights descending through the dark. "I know I'm from another world and maybe you all get to see things like this all the time but I'm loving this."

"It's certainly impressive," Humphrey agreed. "We may not get to see such things all the time, now, but we're only beginning our time as adventurers. We have lives of wonder ahead of us."

Jason looked at Humphrey's handsome face and broad shoulders as Humphrey gazed winsomely out of their bubble.

"Damn, Humphrey," Jason said. "You must be beating the ladies off with a stick."

"I do alright," Humphrey said. "Things didn't end well with Gabrielle, but the start and middle were good. I don't regret our time together and it gave me some important perspective."

"Listen to you all mature," Jason said. "What happened to that nervous guy from half a year ago?"

"He got a friend who pushed him into trying new things. Even if those were sometimes poison soup."

"Oh, that was one time," Jason said. "How was I meant to know they swapped out the regular cook instead of closing for the day? And it wasn't poison soup, it was just... improperly prepared."

Jason glanced at Sophie, looking around as wide-eyed as the rest of them.

"If you'd decided against being an adventurer right now, where would you be?" he asked her.

"No place good," she said. "I'm glad Belinda talked me into it."

"This is just the beginning," Humphrey said. "We'll have many days like this."

As they neared the bottom of the lake, they saw domes of air over dark ruins lit up by cheap magic lamps.

“Those domes are big versions of what we’re using, right?” Jason asked Clive.

“I’m not sure,” Clive said. “I’d like to take a look for myself.”

“Which one do you think Emir was talking about?” Jason asked. “He said the middle dome but there’s a whole cluster of them.”

“There’s meant to be tunnels connecting them,” Clive said. “Just pick one and we’ll figure it out.”

Jason directed the orb of air they were floating in to the base of one of the domes. The dome held out only the water, so once the dome and their bubble connected they could easily step into it and off the platform, without getting wet. As Clive put the platform away, they saw plenty of other adventures were likewise finding their way in.

Looking around at the inside of the dome, their surroundings were an ancient stone village. Long claimed by the lake’s water, the village was once again dry from the dome holding back the lake. The borders of the village were an exact match for the dome of air. Slimy growth was everywhere, fortunately giving traction to what would have otherwise been slippery cobbles underfoot, worn smooth by water. As the others looked over the buildings, Jason and Clive turned their attention to the dome. In what looked to be a circle around the entire village, a stone ring engraved with runes was set into the ground.

“Look at this,” Clive said, pointing it out to Jason. They crouched down to examine it more closely.

“The cobbles end right at this ring,” Jason said. Outside the stone ring and the dome of air that followed its curve around the village, the lake bed was all silt, rock and submarine growth. On the inside of the ring was cobbled ground.

“I’d say this ring was once used to keep this dome up permanently,” Clive postulated as he examined it. “See these repairs? I’m guessing the domes collapsed when this place was abandoned and Emir’s people used the ring as a platform for these new domes. They’ll only be temporary, though. Re-establishing permanent domes would be prohibitively expensive, even using the existing infrastructure.”

Now Jason was working more on grasping magical theory, he was becoming more interested in the functionality of magic. Clive was more than happy to play the role of mentor.

“We might want to get moving,” Neil suggested. “If we stop to examine everything we see, we’ll never get anywhere.”

“He’s right,” Humphrey said. “We need to find our way to the right dome because I don’t think this one is it.”

“Do you all feel that?” Sophie asked. The rest of the team looked at each other and collectively shook their heads.

“Outside the dome,” Sophie said. “A half-dozen iron-rank auras.”

As the only team member with an aura sense power, Sophie had detected the approaching monsters first. She pointed and the others looked, spying a group of monsters moving along the bottom of the lake. They were large with shark bodies and crab legs, all covered in shell plating. They were heading straight for the dome.

“Shabs,” Jason said. “How nostalgic.”

“Take a three-two formation,” Humphrey instructed and the team moved into position. Humphrey, Sophie and Jason formed a line behind which were Neil and Clive. Clive had his hands up in front of him, where a magic circle appeared vertically in the air. He was feeding mana into it, ready to trigger. Humphrey conjured his large sword and waited while Sophie stood, relaxed, beside him. Jason's cloak was already in place and he conjured his dagger, looking between it and Humphrey's giant dragon wing sword.

“Ready?” Neil asked as the shabs neared the dome.

“Go for it,” Sophie said and Neil immediately chanted a spell.

“Strike hard and true.”

Sophie started shimmering slightly with silver-gold magic.

Ability: [Bolster] (Growth)

- Spell (magic, boon)
- Cost: Moderate mana..
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.

- Current rank: Iron 6 (19%)
- Effect (iron): The next essence ability used by the targeted ally has increased effect.

Sophie sliced her leg upward in a vertical kick that demonstrated impressive flexibility. A blade of wind slashed out, passing through the dome unimpeded and striking one of the approaching shabs. It exploded in a wash of red liquid and a storm of bubbles that obscured the others.

“You weren’t kidding about that explosive effect in water,” Humphrey said.

“Split, please,” Clive requested, Humphrey and Sophie moving aside to give him an unobstructed line to the enemy. The remaining five shabs passed through what was left of the first and Clive chanted a spell.

“Feel the power of reality remade.”

A beam of rainbow light passed out of the magic circle floating in front of Clive's hands, locking onto the next-closest shab. The red faded from the rainbow, which then vanished. The shad stopped dead, fluid boiling out from under its shell plates.

"I figured heat would be enough," Clive said. "I didn't want to burn through too much mana."

Ability: [Wrath of the Magister] (Magic)

- Spell (fire, magic, curse, poison, wounding, ice, dimension)
- Cost: Moderate mana plus additional mana per effect.
- Cooldown: 1 minute.

- Current rank: Iron 5 (38%)

- Effect (iron): Lock a prismatic beam onto an enemy. Expend additional mana to alter the target's reality, using any combination of the available colour effects. This cannot be used in conjunction with the other variant of this spell, which requires an alternate incantation.

- Effect (iron): Lock a prismatic beam onto an enemy. Expend additional mana to unmake reality in a localised area, creating an annihilating void sphere inside the target. This effect requires magic to be channelled into the target at an extreme mana cost until sufficient mana has been channelled to trigger the effect.

- [Red] (high mana): Target's temperature is significantly increased (frost burn if combined with blue).
- [Yellow] (high mana): Target's abilities have increased mana cost.
- [Pink] (moderate mana): Target's resistances are reduced.
- [Green] (moderate mana): Target's blood is poisonous to itself.
- [Purple] (very high mana): Expend mana harms the target.
- [Orange] (very high mana): Target suffers increased damage from all sources.
- [Blue] (high mana): Target's temperature is significantly decreased (frost burn if combined with red).

Humphrey and Sophie slid back in front of Clive and Neil. Three shabs were down before they even reached the dome.

"What's that?" Neil asked, pointing at another shape approaching through the water. It looked something like an octopus made of thorny vines. "It looks nasty,"

"That's Stash," Sophie said, who could sense the shape-shifting dragon's aura. Humphrey had let his boisterous familiar make his own way through the wake. Jason's summoned familiar had many advantages over a bonded familiar like Humphrey's, but a bond had its own advantages. Where Jason could only sense Colin while the leech swarm was subsumed into his body, Humphrey and Stash could always sense one another. They would each know the other's general condition and could find one another over any distance.

Stash wrapped his thorny tentacles around the rearmost shab, seeking out vulnerable crevices between shell plates. The other two shabs finally reached the dome. One was met by a huge sword swinging down, cutting through the front half of the monster and leaving a ragged split.

In a more competent version of his very first shad fight, Jason rolled under the monster, coming up and slitting his dagger through the monster's vulnerable underside. Ichor splattered down over his cloak and he extracted himself as the monster fell dead. He tossed away the despoiled cloak which then vanished. The ichor that had been on it was suddenly unsupported and fell to the ground.

"That was good," Humphrey said, right before Stash splashed through the dome, his giant octopus from drenching Jason and Humphrey with shab guts and water. Sophie vanished before being struck, reappearing nearby. Stash turned into a puppy, looking up at Humphrey with innocent eyes.

"Ew," Jason said unhappily.

"I guess we know which of us is going out there to loot the monsters," Neil said. "No point me getting all messy if you're already like that."

Jason groaned, taking out his necklace of the deep, a series of round, colourful stones strung on a sinewy cord. Clipping it around his neck, he closed his eyes and mouth, holding his nose as he stepped through the dome.

The necklace shielded him from the pressure of the depths and weighed him down as he walked blindly through the shab-tainted water. He held his breath in spite of the necklace's power to let him breathe water. Its fierce chill would have made it an unpleasant proposition in any case. Unwilling to open his eyes, he stumbled about until he felt he had touched enough shab goo to trigger three loot notifications. He kept his sense of direction enough to find his way back without opening his eyes.

Everyone backed off as he remerged, drenched in water and semi-liquid shab remains. Opening his eyes he saw the notices were there and accepted them, all the goo in the water and on Jason and Humphrey dissolving in rainbow smoke. Outside the dome, the rainbow smoke bubbled its way up towards the surface of the lake.

The coins looted from the shabs appeared in the dimensional storage abilities of Clive, Rufus and Jason. Neil, experienced from his own looting ability, stepped back and neatly caught his own bag of coins as it fell from overhead. Sophie, less experienced, had it bounce off her skull.

"You could have warned me," she told Jason.

“When you go wading into a freezing cold lake to fish out money for everyone,” he said. “We'll see how much your mind is on the little details.”

He pulled a vial of orange liquid from his belt and drank it.

“Ooh, spicy.”

Steam started rising off of Jason's body and clothes. After a few minutes his skin, hair and clothes were all dry.

“Glad I bought those,” he said. “Remind me to thank Jory for suggesting them.”

Jory was actually participating in the event, although Jason hadn't seen him. The various crafting associations had decided there was a good chance of lost crafting secrets being found and had formed several teams to join in. To avoid conflict, each team was made up of different kind of magic craftspeople, from leatherworkers to weapon-smiths, engravers to alchemists.

They had no intention of seeking out Emir's scythe, instead intending to scour the hidden astral space for item-making secrets. Jory had travelled with the craft association contingent and hadn't run into Jason.

After handling the shabs, Jason and his team went looking for the central dome. While they had been fighting, other teams had found the tunnel and they followed the other adventurers. The tunnel sloped down under the lake bed, leading underground between domes. The central area was obviously more important than the dome they had come from. The buildings were larger and more impressive, looking more like the central location of a city than the village of the dome they had come from.

Following the crowd, they found Emir standing near to archway of dark stone, right in the middle of a large square. This allowed the adventurers to spill in around it. Gary was present, along with Constance and some of Emir's people who were drawing an elaborate ritual circle around the archway. Placed at various points within the ritual diagram were more than a dozen items, all long-weather stone artefacts. Emir's people kept the adventurers back, warning them against using abilities that would interfere with the ambient magic. Just the presence of so many essence users and their magic items was bad enough.

There was a long wait as all the adventurers either arrived or were rescued from their poor preparations for underwater travel and returned to the surface, destined to participate no further. One of the main culprits was the difficulty of getting rituals right amongst all the adventurers. Without a power to smooth out the ambient magic, like Clive had, rituals could easily go awry. Emir had a ritualist with a similar ability on staff for that exact reason.

Once Emir confirmed it with his people, he addressed the crowd.

“And here we are at last,” he called out loudly. He wasn't using a voice projection circle this time, again to not disrupt the magic. “Here we have reached, together, the limit of what I can tell you. The door will open soon and my people will direct you through it. I ask that you are patient while waiting for your turn to enter, as my people will deal with anyone acting in a disorderly manner. Remember, the team that brings me the scythe is the team that wins the grand prize.”

Quest: [Legacy of the Reaper]

You have joined the mission to retrieve the Order of the Reaper's legacy.

- Objective: Pass the reaper trials 0/5
- Objective: Reach the centre of the City of Fallen Echoes.
- Objective: Obtain [Golden Scythe of the Reaper] 0/1.
- Objective: Deliver [Golden Scythe of the Reaper] to Emir Bahadir 0/1.

- Reward: Racial gift transfiguration.

“I've been waiting for that,” Jason said. “Oh, it's a good one.”

It was not the first time the party had seen a quest appear, having cleared various contracts together. This was the first time they had seen a reward that wasn't just spirit coins, however. Neil's eyes were transfixed by the listed reward.

“Is that what I think it is?” he asked.

“I think so, yeah,” Jason said. “Should be for all of us, since we all got the quest.”

“How is that even possible?” he asked.

“Not sure,” Jason said. “My theory is that once you reach a certain threshold for handsomeness, it flows over and starts having weird effects.”

Despite the astounding quest window in front of them, the team all turned to look at Jason.

“What?” he asked.

Chapter 156: The City of Fallen Echoes

There was some pushing and jostling from the adventurers eager to pass through the aperture until a few low growls from Gary pulled the stropy ones in line. Emir stood with Gary, watching from the side as they went through, one at a time. When his team drew close to Emir, Jason greeted him.

“I don’t suppose you’ve got any insider tips, Emir?” Jason asked as they went past. This drew the attention of the adventurers around them.

“Jason,” Emir said with a wry smile. “If I had anything else to tell you, I would have told everyone. The goal to have the scythe brought to me. If it was to have the scythe brought to me by you, then you would be the only one I sent.”

“Fair enough.”

Jason had encountered two astral apace apertures before, both to the rainforest astral space that supplied water to the delta, along with many of the desert’s oases. Those had been shimmering blue, floating unattached as if not really connected to the world. As he got a look at this astral gate aperture, it was very different. It was contained within an archway the size of large double doors. The archway was made of stone, a single piece with the black, smooth gloss of polished obsidian. Unlike the buildings around it, centuries of submersion had done nothing to mar its surface or dim its lustre. The aperture itself, within the archway, held a strange darkness that almost seemed to have substance, devouring the light around it.

“Is it just me,” Neil said, “or does anyone else think that looks like Jason’s cloak?”

Jason dimmed the stars on his cloak down to nothing. The result was a void draped around him that, as Neil suggested, looked very much like the dark aperture before them.

“It does,” Clive said. “My guess would be a dark essence ability was used as the foundation for this archway, likely even the-”

“We should keep it moving,” Humphrey said, stopping Clive before his fascination overcame his awareness of the situation. This got a look of gratitude from the member of Emir’s staff standing next to the aperture. His task was to keep things moving but he also didn’t want to annoy people his boss obviously thought highly of.

Humphrey stepped up to the aperture. “See you on the other side,” he told the others and stepped through. Like Humphrey, it was not a first time entering an astral space for Neil and he followed without hesitation. Jason prompted Clive through next, not wanting to leave him to his curiosity. Sophie paused in front of the aperture, reluctance and uncertainty saturating her body language.

“Are we sure that thing isn’t just devouring people?” she asked. “It kind of looks like it’s devouring people.”

She was hardly the first adventurer to hesitate when looking at the lightless void of the aperture. Jason gave her a reassuring pat on the shoulder, stepping past her.

“No one is going to push you,” he said. “If you don’t want to do this, go back with Emir and we’ll see you in a few weeks.”

Jason paused in front of the aperture himself, an anticipatory grin crossing his face before he stepped through.

“Miss Wexler,” the staff member said. “I’ll need you to either go through or move out of the way.”

Sophie looked at him, nodded to herself and held her breath as she stepped through the portal.

Different modes of teleportation had different feels to them. The feel of travelling through the portals created by Hester felt different to Jason’s own ability. It, in turn, felt different again to Danielle Geller’s ordinary teleport power. She had the same one as her son, but her higher-rank version allowed her to take more people. She would sometimes teleport around with the Geller family teams, including Humphrey’s, to help them acclimatise themselves to such abilities.

These benefits were not available to everyone, as evidenced by the state of people Jason found when he emerged from a dark archway, identical to the one he had stepped into. They ranged from looking slightly peaky to being on hands and knees, throwing up. Jason had no such issues.

Ability: Astral Affinity

- Increased resistance to dimension effects and astral forces. Dimension abilities have increased effect and transcendent damage is increased.

His racial gift made him more tolerant to the effects of teleportation but, more than that, the sensation of going through the portal had been incredibly familiar. Travelling through the dark aperture had felt exactly like using his shadow teleport.

As Jason emerged, system messages immediately started popping up. He dismissed them to the periphery of his vision so he could take a look around. He started by getting out of the way before more people arrived, stepping around those loudly vomiting.

At a glance, he was on some kind of very large tower with a flat top. It was made of dark, grey brick, with lichen growing in the crevices. The archway stood right in the middle

and the tower was apparently quite tall as he could mostly see sky over the edges. A sun was high in a sky, blurred by summer haze. The air was humid and heavy, as much as the delta on its worst day. He could hear water splashing against rocks from below, the unmistakable sound of the sea. The breezeless air carried none of the ocean's salty freshness, however.

The adventurers who had already recovered from being magically transported were turning their faces to the sky or wandering over the edges to look around. Others were looking for their party members and Jason noticed that most were not finding them. Jason himself could find no trace of Humphrey, Neil or Clive. As he waited to see if Sophie would emerge after him, he took a bracelet of sandy yellow stones on a loop and slipped it over his wrist.

Item: [Oasis Bracelet] (iron rank, uncommon)

- *A bracelet that draws on the power of water quintessence to bestow the blessings of a personal oasis (accessory, bracelet).*
- **Effect:** Keeps the wearer cool and refreshed. Bracelet energy is consumed at a varying rate according to climate.
- **Effect:** Reduces incoming fire and heat damage. This rapidly consumes bracelet energy.
- **Effect:** Consume a water quintessence gem to completely refill bracelet energy.

Taking out a water quintessence gem, he touched it to the bracelet and it melted away. The yellow stones turned blue and Jason immediately felt the benefits of his magical item as the muggy and oppressive air felt suddenly cool and refreshing.

Sophie emerged from the archway just as Jason was taking a deep, satisfying breath. Looking startled, she started waving her hand in front of her like she was swiping at insects. Jason walked back over to the archway.

“Just imagine the screens moving out of the way, to the edge of your vision,” he told her. She frowned at the space in front of her.

“Why so many?” she asked as they moved out of the way for the next adventurer to appear.

“I haven't read them yet,” he told her.

She looked around.

“So this is an astral space,” she said. “Where are the others?”

“Not here,” he said. “This is only a fraction of the people who went through, so there may be other arrival locations.”

“Unless the magic void door is eating people,” she said.

“Let’s hope not,” Jason. “Take a look around?”

“It’ll get us away from all these people throwing up. What’s going on with that?”

“They can’t handle teleportation as well as us,” Jason said. “Notice all the celestines are fine. You have an ability to endure dimensional effects that I happen to share.”

“Is that we didn’t get eaten?”

“They weren’t eaten. Probably. As for whether it affected us arriving in the same place, I’m not sure.”

They walked over to the edge of the tower, which had no railing of any kind, simply ending in a precipitous edge. Their tower was huge, some twenty metres across and at least seventy high. It would have loomed over even the tallest building in Greenstone.

Looking out from the edge, the tower was located right on the coastline, with water from a seemingly boundless sea stretching out to their right. To their left was an ancient, abandoned city. It was staggeringly vast, sprawling off into the distance as far as they could see. Plant life had long ago reclaimed it, with vines crawling over the building and trees growing in the boulevards through the gaps left by broken and dislodged flagstones. Although larger than Greenstone by at least several times, it was more jungle than metropolis.

Stopping to look and listen, they heard the sounds of creatures; the warble of birds, the distant roaring of some predator, be it animal or monster. They were even able to pick out a few inhuman figures shambling and prowling through the overgrown streets.

The tower Jason and Sophie were on was not the only great tower that could be seen. Maybe twenty kilometres distant was another, also right on the waterline. They moved around the edge of the tower to get a better look at the city below.

-
- [You have used a panoramic view to unveil parts of the City of Fallen Echoes map. Visit unveiled locations to add additional details.](#)
-

Other adventurers were likewise moving over to the edge. There did not appear to be any way of getting inside the tower from the roof, but some adventurers found the top of a stairwell that wound its way down the outside. Some started rushing down immediately to try and get some kind of lead on the competition. Most chose to stay and take stock. All of the teams present were missing members, it seemed, and none of them was clear on exactly what they should be doing. Sophie and Jason found their own spot, sitting on the edge with their legs dangling off.

“We should start with those messages we put aside,” Jason said, pulling the screens up out of the corner of his vision.

-
- You have entered a zone of high magical saturation. Magical manifestations will occur at an increased rate.
-

“What’s magical saturation?” Sophie asked. “Are magical manifestations good?”

“Ambient magic, the invisible magic all around us,” Jason explained, “is graded in two ways. One is magical density, which is kind of like the strength of the local magic. It determines how powerful a magic item can be and work normally and the power of rituals that can be performed. The most important effect, though, is it determines the strength of what monsters will appear. Emir said the magical density here should be the same as the world outside, so we can expect mostly iron-rank monsters, plus some bronze. Silver should be extremely rare, but a silver rank monster can linger for years before breaking down back into magic, so there may be one or two around, somewhere.”

“That’s good to know, but doesn’t actually answer my questions,” Sophie said.

“I’m providing context,” Jason said.

“You’re starting to sound like Clive.”

“Clive’s a smart guy,”

“But he also likes to waffle on. You should hear him and Belinda. It’s interminable.”

“Anyway,” Jason said, “while magical density is how strong the magic is, magic saturation of how much of it there is. If you get higher magical saturation, you get more magical manifestation. That means more essences, more awakening stones and more monsters, which is all good.”

“More monsters is good?”

“Our ability to grow stronger is reliant on throwing ourselves into challenge after challenge,” Jason said. “Here, we have all the challenge we could ask for. This is a holy land for adventurers looking to get stronger. It’s a shame, now, that we only have eighteen days.”

“Then our first step should be regrouping with the others,” Sophie said. The other messages screens stacked up were all variations on a theme.

-
- Party member [Humphrey Geller] has gone out of range. Voice communication and loot sharing with out of range party members are unavailable.
-

Clive, Neil and Humphrey were all out of range, while Jason and Sophie had only been out of range for as long as Jason had been on one side of the aperture and Sophie the other.

-
- Party member [Sophie Wexler] has re-entered range. Voice communication and loot sharing are restored. Voice communication and loot sharing with out of range party members are unavailable.
-

“So, how do we find them?” Sophie asked.

Jason took a furtive glance at the other adventurers. Some were huddled together, having discussions like Jason and Sophie. Others were looking to form makeshift groups after being separated from their own. Jason recognised a few faces but no one he knew well. A few people seemed to recognise him by his cloak, a couple of whom were heading in their direction.

“Jason Asano?” one of them asked.

“That’s right.”

“We’ve been separated from our group and it looks like you have been, too. You could join up with us if you like, until you find your own people.”

Jason glanced at Sophie, who gave a little head shake.

“Sorry,” Jason said. “We’ve lost people but our most mobile people are still together. We’re going to use that to cover more ground. Thank you for the offer though. It’s very kind.”

After a little more polite chatter they walked away.

“I don’t think they were being kind,” Sophie said quietly. “I think they were trying to glom onto someone they’d heard of.”

“They’re just trying to survive in a situation that’s gotten away from them,” Jason said. “You of all people should understand that.”

Sophie glanced at the other adventurers more sympathetically.

“I can see that,” she said. “You think maybe we should put a team together?”

“No,” Jason said. “I was also inclined to keep it to just us. I wasn’t lying about the speed thing, and trying to mesh a new group together in a dangerous environment could cause trouble a critical moment.”

“Just us, then,” she said. “So what are we doing?”

“Pull up the quest,” Jason said, doing the same himself.

Quest: [Legacy of the Reaper]

You have joined the mission to retrieve the Order of the Reaper's legacy.

- Objective: Pass the reaper trials 0/5
- Objective: Reach the centre of the City of Fallen Echoes.
- Objective: Obtain [Golden Scythe of the Reaper] 0/1.
- Objective: Deliver [Golden Scythe of the Reaper] to Emir Bahadir 0/1.

- Reward: Racial gift transfiguration.

“This is the City of Fallen Echoes,” Jason said, quietly. “The objective is to get to the middle. Knowing that might be a good edge for us against other teams. It also means our team knows where to go. As long as we head for the middle, we’ll find them eventually.”

“And where is the middle exactly?” Sophie asked. “Do we just head away from the water?”

Jason pulled up his map. It was a separate ability from his party interface, which meant Sophie couldn't use it herself, but it did allow her to see it when Jason did. The corner of the map listed their location.

➤ Zone: City of Fallen Echoes (Gate Tower Three)

The map showed a perfectly circular city, surrounded by water. All but the area around one tower with a marker for Jason's position on it was veiled.

“I can't see places I haven't been on the map,” Jason said. “The centre is pretty obvious from the outline though.”

He got to his feet and Sophie did the same.

“Let's get down,” he said. “The stairs start over there.”

“Forget that,” Sophie said, walking backwards away from the edge.

“That looks suspiciously like a run-up,” Jason said.

“I won't go too hard,” she said. “You should be able to follow it you put some guts in it.”

She ran to the edge of the tower and vaulted off without hesitation. Jason watched her sail through the air plunging toward the ground until she activated her leaf on the wind ability, slowing into a gentle descent. She landed in the middle of a wide boulevard overgrown with trees that headed in the direction they would be going. Jason looked down at her and shrugged, taking his own run-up and leaping out after her.

Chapter 157:

Shade

Jason's cloak fluttered around him as he drifted to the ground.

"Clive said that some people think the powers we get are reflections of who we are," Sophie said.

"So?"

"So, floating out of the sky with an attention-grabbing cloak made out of sparkles seems very much like you."

"I can't help if I'm pretty," Jason said. "I like your new armour, by the way. It's a very 'killing things for money' kind of look. Professional."

Gilbert Bertinelli, who supplied Jason's armour dealt exclusively in men's apparel, but Jason had asked for his recommendation for someone who worked with trap weaver leather. He suggested someone who developed armour specifically for women. The result was a simple outfit with clean lines, compared to the flowing lines of Jason's combat robes.

In shades of dark grey and black, Sophie's outfit reminded Jason of combat fatigues more than anything else. It had a neat but loose fit for maximum mobility, with hardened panels over critical areas and plenty of loops and pockets for gear. Compared to the body-hugging clothes Sophie normally wore it was all business, masking her lithe body.

"I would have preferred something in white," Sophie said.

Jason acknowledged to himself that she looked exceptionally good in white, but didn't say anything. As much as the indenture contract was in practicality a fiction, he was very conscious of the men who had sought to exert power over her for their own gratification. He didn't want to be one more guy piling it on.

"So I guess we head off," Jason said.

"If those noises we're hearing are anything to go by, we'll be running into plenty of monsters. Especially if they're spawning faster because of the extra magic."

"I reckon you're right," Jason agreed. "If we come up against anything nasty, you grab its attention and I'll set up the damage. Otherwise, we take it as it comes."

"Sounds good," Sophie said. "With all these trees and broken buildings throwing shadows, this place should be a playground for you."

"If you don't mind," a voice said from behind them, "I would like to have a word before you set off."

They both turned around, startled at whoever had approached them undetected. Standing in the middle of the overgrown street was a dark figure, like a person made of the same shadow-stuff as Jason's cloak. He was a living silhouette, a person-shaped hole in the universe.

"Who are you?" Sophie asked. "What are you?"

"Why do you sound British?" Jason asked.

"I don't know what British is," the shadowy figure said.

"That's for the best," Jason said. "Don't tell them you don't have guns or they'll colonise the crap out of you."

"I lack the context to grasp the exact scenario you are positing," the figure said. "I assume you are introducing a confusing tangent to the conversation to gauge my response to an unanticipated reaction to my approach."

"Yeah, that's pretty much it. I like you, British shadow guy. You got a name?"

"I am Shade."

"That's rough," Jason said. "You're a person made of shadows and your name is Shade? That's like my name being Human."

"You are not human," Shade said.

"Yeah, but I was when I was named. I'm Jason and this is Sophie. Are you a local, Shade?"

"In a manner of speaking," Shade said. "I am the invigilator of the Legacy Trials. I will administer each of the five tests you must pass to receive the legacy of the Order of the Reaper."

"If you're running the show, why have you appeared before us?" Sophie asked.

"My nature is multifarious. I am currently appearing before every person who has entered the trial grounds. I am here to introduce you to the trials and instruct you on what you must do to pass them."

"Well that sucks," Jason said. "And here was me thinking we had a head start. Why did we not appear in the same place as our other team members, Shade?"

"There are seven gate towers. Each person that enters arrives at a random tower."

"Seven," Sophie said. "We could have been split up entirely, so it could be worse."

"I'm worried about Clive," Jason said. "Humphrey will be fine on his own and Neil is a healer, so he'll have no trouble finding some people to roam around with. Clive is a harder sell, especially with Clive as the salesman."

"There's not much we can do about it here," Sophie said. "All we can do is head for the middle and trust that he can do the same."

Jason gave a reluctant nod.

“If I may interject,” Shade said, “part of my task is to instruct you on the trials to come and what will be required of you.”

“Go ahead, Shade.”

“Thank you,” Shade said. “The legacy of the Order of the Reaper is here to be claimed. The one to do so will be the one who proves that they can embody the ideals of the Order. Courage, intellect, resolve, capability and wisdom. Over the course of five trials, you will need to demonstrate these five virtues.”

“And these trials are located in the middle of the city?” Jason asked.

“The final three are located in the heart of the city,” Shade said. “This City of Fallen Echoes is itself the second trial; the trial of capability. It constitutes the longest of the five trials and not everyone will successfully navigate the dangers therein.”

Quest: [The Second Trial]

The second of the Reaper's trials is to reach the heart of the city.

- Objective: Reach the centre of the City of Fallen Echoes.
- Reward: Random magic item.

“The city is the second trial?” Sophie asked. “What about the first?”

“The first trial I will administer now. It is the simplest in that it cannot be failed. Instead, it is a choice that will be important once you reach the final trials.”

“It can't be failed?” Jason asked. “That seems like a gimme but I can't help thinking there's a catch.”

“The trial is simply this,” Shade said. “Do you wish to enter the second trial with wisdom or courage?”

“What's the difference?” Sophie asked.

“To enter with wisdom means you will receive two items. One will allow you to escape the trials entirely. You will not be allowed to enter again but it can extricate you from an inescapable situation. The other is a recovery item that can save you in a critical moment.”

“And courage means entering the second trial without them,” Jason said.

“Exactly so,” Shade acknowledged.

“It seems like wisdom is objectively the better choice,” Sophie said.

“That is why it is the path of wisdom,” Shade said.

“Then why would anyone choose courage?” Jason asked.

“Each of the final trials will test the virtues that have yet to be demonstrated,” Shade said. “But to reach the trials of intelligence and resolve, one must pass a trial that tests that which they did not demonstrate here, in the first trial. For those who have already proven their courage, the test of wisdom will assess their judgement. Failure means being removed from the trials, but there is no danger in it. For those who have proven their wisdom, they must face a test of courage. The test is simple but dangerous. To pass is to move on and to fail is to die.”

“So it’s a choice between safety now and danger later or safety later and danger now,” Jason said. “What can you tell us about the later trials?”

“Only that you will be informed of the nature of each trial you face, immediately before you face it. Once you have navigated the city, each future trial will be explained, after which you may choose to face the next trial or be safely removed from the trials altogether.”

“So you can tell us about the second trial now?” Sophie asked.

“I can, yes,” Shade told her. “There is no limit on time beyond the closure of the trials in eighteen days.”

“What happens if we’re still here after eighteen days?” Jason asked.

“Then you will be trapped here,” Shade said. “There are dangers in this place, of which the monsters are not the greatest. There are two larger threats to be aware of.”

“We appreciate the warning,” Jason said. “What can you tell us about them?”

“I can explain the practical dangers,” Shade said. “If you would prefer, I can explain the origins of the trials and the dangers you will face in undertaking them.”

“I’ll take some context, if you’re offering,” Jason said.

“This astral space was originally a training ground for the Order of the Reaper,” Shade explained. “You travelled here from the ruins of the Order’s final and most hidden redoubt. It was once a hidden place to instruct the Order’s initiates, turned into a final hiding place as the churches sought to purge the Order.”

“The churches purged the Order of the Reaper?” Jason said. “I found an underground fortress that had suffered some kind of attack, centuries ago. I think that belonged to the Order as well.”

“The Order did have an underground facility that was wiped out. At first, it was believed that the hidden training centre had escaped the churches’ attention after they attacked that location. The Order was betrayed, however, and the hiding place under the lake revealed. The churches came, shattered the magic domes that held back the waters and drowned all within.”

“That’s horrifying,” Jason said.

“Which churches?” Sophie asked. “It can’t have been all of them.”

“It was not,” Shade said. “The Order of the Reaper served a number of important purposes. In a world of kings and queens, leaders are chosen by blood instead of virtue. A fool or mad person can, by virtue of birthright, be given the power to consign countless lives to chaos, suffering and death. In such cases, a knife in the dark can be the deliverance of nations.”

“Royal assassins,” Jason said. “I’d say you should try democracy but the results where I come from are very mixed.”

“Though the Order remained hidden in the shadows,” Shade continued, “its function was known and accepted by the nations and organisations of the world. The Adventure Society, the Magic Society, even the churches.”

“But not all of them,” Sophie said.

“No,” Shade said. “There were two churches. One is the church of The Unliving. More than just assassins, the Order were also hunters of the undead. The peace of final rest is the Reaper’s most core principle and more necromancers fell to the Order than princes or kings.”

“The Adventure Society does that, now,” Jason said.

“In the Order’s absence, others must take up their tasks. The church of The Unliving did not act against the Order alone. There was another church that, like the Order, was inimical to the church of The Unliving. Nonetheless, they formed an unholy compact to remove what this church called the unclean methods of the Order.”

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me,” Jason said. “The church of Purity?”

“It is as you say,” Shade confirmed.

“How is that church even vaguely pure?” Jason complained loudly. “They team up with the worst people they can find at the drop of a hat.”

“I do not know of what you speak,” Shade said.

“They’re at it again,” Jason said. “The church of Purity have teamed up with some interdimensional turd nugget to strip-mine astral spaces.”

“That can wait until we’re back outside,” Sophie said. “Right now, we need to focus on these trials. I assume you were working your story towards the danger you mentioned.”

“Yes,” Shade said. “When the churches discovered the training facilities beneath the lake, the last grandmaster of the Order sent all the initiates here, into the city. They then sealed the entrance, that the churches could not follow. The keys to the entrance were taken and scattered across the world. The goal was that someday, someone could prove

themselves worthy of the Order's ideals and reclaim that which was left behind. That day should now be coming soon, but if all you who have entered fail, there will be another chance."

"Oh?"

"After eighteen days, the trials will close. The keys can be used to open them again in a year, that others may try where you failed."

"What about all those initiates?" Sophie asked. "What happened to them?"

"The churches were unwilling to leave behind the threat posed by the initiates, but could not reach them in the astral space. In the early days of the Order, one of the grandmasters found this astral space. It was unstable, a proto-astral space that was as likely to dissolve into the astral as become a true realm."

"Obviously it did," Sophie said.

"The Order of the Reaper has long used such places," Shade said. "There was ancient knowledge of how to anchor such realms, provided by the Reaper itself."

"So, the Order really is connected to the great astral being," Jason said.

"It was," Shade said. "The grandmaster who built this place was akin to you, Jason Asano. Like you, he was an outworlder with the dark essence. Many of the functions of this place are based on his abilities. I was his summoned familiar, once."

"You were a familiar?" Jason asked.

"I was. Now, I am bound to this place until the trials are completed and the legacy claimed."

"He was from my world?" Jason asked.

"He was not," Shade said. "You were originally humans, which do not exist in the world he originated in."

"You didn't tell us what happened to the initiates," Sophie said.

"As I said, the churches were unwilling to leave the initiates be, but the means by which this astral space was anchored to the world left the those hunting them locked out. So the churches made a second bargain, this time with entities of the deep astral. Known as the vorger, they have the power to violate dimensional boundaries."

"Like those of an astral space," Jason said.

"Yes," Shade said. "They cannot enter a truly physical realm, but astral spaces are partly of the astral and partly of the physical. It is unknown how they lured such creatures as they are animalistic entities, acting only on primal urges. Lure them the churches did, however, and the vorger remain here to this day."

"What are these vorger, exactly?" Sophie asked.

“They are creatures intangible in nature, for they are not physical beings. They take many shapes but their nature is the same. Their touch warps flesh, twisting it into hideous new shapes.”

“That’s what happened to the initiates?” Jason asked. “They were killed by the vorger?”

“Worse,” Shade said. “The vorger do not kill. Their victims do not enjoy the sweet release of death. In what is perhaps the greatest insult to the Reaper, the initiates were warped into unaging abominations of flesh. They never die, their souls trapped inside twisted shells of rage and pain, cursed to eternal madness. They roam this place still, striking out against anything they encounter.”

“Those are the dangers you mentioned,” Jason said. “The vorger and these flesh abominations.”

“Yes.”

“What can you tell us about how to fight them?” Sophie asked.

“The vorger have no physical substance,” Shade said. “Magical weapons will have some limited effect on them but unless you find them in isolation, it will be insufficient to handle their numbers. They tend to appear in swarms and without specialised tools or abilities, they are difficult to deal with. They will warp your bodies until the city gains another flesh abomination. As you both possess an affinity for astral energy, you will be far more resistant than most, however.”

“Your abilities should work well,” Jason said to Sophie. “My sword should be effective enough as well. What about the flesh abominations, Shade?”

“If you can kill them and release their souls from torment, then that would be a mercy. My advice, however, is to avoid or escape them. Their power is at the bronze-rank level and they are no easy match. Their bodies will adapt to your attacks and defences, making them more effective and you less so, with every passing moment. If you must fight them, then I would recommend fighting one after another instead of working together. When they adapt to one form of attack they may create a weakness to another which you can exploit.”

“Thank you,” Jason said. “We’ll remember your words.”

“Then your next step is the first trial,” Shade said. “Your choices remain: courage or wisdom.”

“What do you think?” Sophie asked Jason.

“I’m thinking wisdom,” Jason said. “I feel like courage is probably the best choice for getting to the end, but as much as I would love a cloud palace, I’ll take alive and no cloud palace over dead and no cloud palace.”

“I would have thought you would have gone for courage,” Sophie said. “All the stories I’ve heard about you paint you as pretty reckless.”

“I used to be,” Jason said. “Probably still am, to be honest, but Farrah’s death brought some things home for me. Death is easy enough to find as an adventurer. I don’t need to go looking for it.”

“Alright,” Sophie said with a nod, then turned to Shade. “Two for wisdom.”

“Very well,” Shade said and raised his shadowy hands. Resting in each was a small vial and a medallion. They took them, feeling the cold of Shade’s shadowy hand as they picked up the objects.

Jason looked at the medallion first. It was made of the same glossy black stone as the archway through which they had entered the astral space and was embossed with a scythe symbol. It was small and on a cord that could be easily slipped over the neck.

Item: [Medallion of Escape] (silver rank, uncommon)

A path of escape for those with the wisdom to know when to let go (consumable, teleport).

- **Effect:** Project your aura into the medallion to be immediately evacuated from the astral space. Only functions within the City of Fallen Echoes.

“Project your aura into the medallion,” Jason read. “Doesn’t that mean anyone without aura control can’t use it?”

“Part of wisdom is knowing which challenges not to accept,” Shade said.

“Good thing you picked up an aura power,” Jason told Sophie. They both slipped their medallions over their necks and tucked them under their armour. They then looked at the second item, the vial.

Item: [Lesser Miracle Potion] (iron rank, legendary)

Salvation in a bottle (consumable, potion).

- **Effect:** Fully restore health, mana and stamina. This potion is only effective on normal and iron-rank individuals. The magic of this potion lingers in the body longer than normal potions, meaning additional recovery health and recovery items will not be effective for a longer period.

“Strewth,” Jason said. “Now, that’s a potion.”

“I didn’t realise potions like this were even possible,” Sophie said.

“Me either,” Jason said, carefully placing it into his potion belt. Like him, Sophie had an enchanted potion belt that would protect the vials from breakage unless a concerted and directed effort was made to do so.

“One last thing,” Jason said to Shade. “I don’t suppose you can tell us where our teammates are?”

“I can,” Shade said, “but I won’t.”

“That’s what I figured. We’ll see you in the middle of the city?”

“You will,” Shade said. “Good luck.”

With that, Shade vanished in a swirl of darkness.

Chapter 158: Seriously Hardcore

The monster was mostly identical to a leopard, except for the legs. They were still covered in spotted fur, like the rest of the creature, but there were eight of them, multi-jointed and emerging from the monster's side like the legs of a spider. The legs were not as good for running but it was an excellent and rapid climber. That didn't much matter when Sophie's wind blade cut half of those legs off and it tumbled to the ground where she finished it with a brutal stomp to the head.

➤ You have defeated [Spotted Tree Cat].

"Spotted tree cat," Jason said. "It lacks imagination but at least it's what it says on the tin. I was worried it would be called a spidard or something. Some of these monster names are just daft. Some of them have got people killed, I'm certain of it."

"How does a monster name get someone killed?" Sophie asked.

"Well, take sloth demons and demon sloths. Demon sloths are iron rank, strong and relatively tough, but slow. Not that hard to take down, as long as you're careful. A sloth demon is a gold-rank monster with a soporific power that cripples your speed, making you easy meat."

"I see your point," Sophie said. "You wouldn't want to get them confused."

"No, you would not. Did Humphrey get you reading the Magic Society monster records? He said he was going to."

"He did," Sophie said. "It's actually pretty interesting, learning about all the crazy stuff that's out there."

"It might seem odd to say this," Jason said, "but you don't want to be too efficient with your kills. You'll do better if you use as many of your abilities as you can."

"It's not like I won't get another chance," Sophie said. "I don't think it's even been an hour. Besides, these easy fights won't do me much good. I need something tougher, or that comes in numbers."

"That's true enough," Jason acknowledged.

He wandered over and touched the creature.

➤ Would you like to loot [Spotted Tree Cat]?

“Hold on for a second,” Sophie said, pulling off her boot and sitting it on a low, broken wall before backing off as Jason did the same. Jason mentally accepted and the creature went up in rainbow smoke, along with the muck on Sophie’s boot. There was some minor spattering on her pants and trouser legs that dissolved as well, causing Sophie to wince at the smell as Jason moved aside.

“Do you ever get used to that?” she asked.

“A little but not really,” Jason said. “On the bright side, after that you can handle pretty much anything. A fought a monster called a belch bug that has this stink that’s meant to make you vomit. Barely a stomach twitch.”

They were making their way down a wide boulevard that went in exactly the direction they wanted. There were eighteen days in which to make the most of the excellent training environment but they decided to start by making their way to the middle of the city. It gave them the best chance of finding their errant party members and they could just roam around fighting monsters from there.

The boulevard was uneven ground, the once neatly-fitted flagstones cracked, pushed up by root growth or displaced entirely by trees. It was still the most open path, though, and offered an easy passage toward the centre of the city. On either side, what had once been impressive buildings rose up, half-collapsed and covered in creepers and other growth.

“We should have a rummage through some of these buildings,” Jason said.

“What happened to going straight to the centre of the city?” Sophie asked.

“We at least have to have a bit of a look around,” Jason said. “Let’s just pick the next awesome-looking building and take a gander. Maybe we’ll find an essence or something.”

“You think?”

“Maybe,” Jason said. “In fairness, we could just as easily find one sitting in the middle of the boulevard. With the increased manifestations and this place having gone untouched for centuries, there could be a veritable hoard just waiting for us to find it.”

“Maybe we could check out one building,” she said. “What about that one?”

Most of the buildings they passed by were two or three storeys tall. The one Sophie pointed out was six, and more intact than most.

“It looks a bit fortressy,” Jason said. “Some kind of military barracks?”

The front entrance once must have been a pair of towering metal doors, but centuries of humid air had left little but rusted scraps behind. The looming doorway was large enough to wheel a siege engine through, as evidenced by the remains of just such a siege engine. It was in some kind of a marshalling courtyard beyond the huge doors, abandoned

to a state of disrepair. Now it was a pile of wooden beams, rusty metal bars and leather straps.

“That’s awesome,” Jason said, looking at it. “Also, suspicious.”

“Suspicious?”

“It may look like a dilapidated pile of junk,” he said, “but its not really dilapidated enough. That wood should have been long rotted away, and that metal might be rusty but compare it to what’s left of the doors. I’ve been on farms and seen what fifty years of abandonment does to a place. This has been here what? Ten times that, at least? In this wet climate, there shouldn’t be any of that thing left.”

“What are you thinking?” Sophie asked.

“I’m thinking you move closer, carefully. See if you can sense an aura off of it.”

Sophie did just that, approaching the large doorway. Before she could sense anything, the fallen pile of metal and wood started moving. What was little more than a pile of rotted wood, rusty metal and leather scraps started re-assembling itself into a vaguely humanoid form. It towered almost four meters high, enough that as it stood upright it became obscured as it was taller even than the huge doorway.

The construct creature was asymmetrical and looked very uncoordinated, with two arms on one side and one on the other. Of the two arms that shared the same side, one was stubby and ended in a crude, rusty claw. The other was longer but less agile, looking like a long box terminating in a rusty ball. The single arm on the other side was actually a platform for a ballista. As it stood up, they both sensed its bronze rank aura.

“Is this one of the Builder cult creations?” Sophie asked as the construct creature assembled itself.

“Unlikely,” Jason said. “It looks like it fits right in here. Probably a monster or something left behind from long ago.”

“Do we run?” Sophie asked.

“Fight,” Jason said, drawing his sword. “Something tells me that some practice fighting construct monsters will pay off, down the line.”

Knowing his core abilities would be useless against the construct creature, Jason silently thanked Gary for making his sword.

“I’ve never fought a bronze-rank monster before,” Sophie said.

“That’s why it will help us get stronger,” Jason said. “If you think you can’t handle it, just run. It doesn’t look like much of a chaser.”

The creature was ducking slowly under the doorway with jerky movements, the monster’s height too much even for the oversized gap. Jason took advantage of its

awkwardness to dash forward. It lashed out crudely with its ball arm but Jason easily dodged, raking his sword against one leg, then the other as he ducked under and passed the creature. His sword did nothing more than scratch the wood but that was all he needed.

-
- Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on [Siege Golem].
 - [Siege Golem] is immune to curses.
 - [Sin] does not take effect.
-
- Affliction immunity has triggered an effect on weapon [Dread Salvation].
 - Weapon [Dread Salvation] has gained an instance of [Stone Cutter].
-

The golem was caught halfway under the door, almost through only to start turning back after Jason. As it did, Sophie moved in to the attack, lashing out with rapid strikes.

-
- Special ability [Immortal Fist] has dealt resonating-force damage to [Siege Golem].
 - [Siege Golem] has an extremely rigid body and suffers additional damage from resonating force.
-

The fight started out strongly in Jason and Sophie's favour, catching the golem in a bad position. Neither Jason nor Sophie had any big attack powers to capitalise, however, and their iron-rank attacks had limited effect of the bronze-rank enemy. Sophie started off stronger with her resonating-force damage, while Jason's attacks did next to nothing as his sword accumulated power. With each attack it dealt increasing amounts of the same resonating-force energy but he would need some time to have a real impact.

The golem focused on Sophie as the greater threat, working its way toward the outside. Just as it was about to get free of the door, she nimbly dodged past it to join Jason on the inside, followed by Jason making his way back out. The mindless construct creature could do no more than react, the same lack of internal spirit that made it immune to Jason's curses making it too stupid to understand it was being played back and forth.

Finally it worked its way loose, courtesy of Jason's sword. It was accumulating enough power to affect even the hardy, bronze-rank construct body and when Jason carved a protrusion from its body it staggered free of the doorway and back into the courtyard.

Jason had reached the point where he could do some real damage, but free of the door, the golem had its own tricks to use. The stubby claw yanked back the ballista arm, and from within the arm a ballista bolt jerked out, ready to be fired. The golem launched it at Jason but the crude, massive weapon was easy to dodge. He moved aside, the

creature's aim obvious and the bolt missed him, the huge metal head digging into the stone floor.

Just as Jason was about to renew his attack, the shaft of the ballista bolt explodes, firing out finger-length shards of piercing wood, sharp as needles and hard as iron. Sophie, on the other side of the golem, was far enough away that she could duck out of the doorway before the shards reached her. Jason, on the other hand, took the full brunt. The attacks carried the inherent power of bronze-rank attacks, shredding his cloak and piercing his armour. He shielded his face with his arms as he turned his body to present a smaller profile and protect certain delicate areas. His arms, legs and sides were riddled with the wooden shards, which were left sticking out of him like echidna spines. He snatched a potion from his belt and chugged it, the healing power doing little more than pushing out all the spines.

The golem, in the meantime, had brought its ungainly box-arm with the rusty ball-hand up in the air. It brought it down in Jason's direction as he was still staggered and inattentive, the ball coming loose on the end of a cable, extending out as it swung down hard. Jason realised the danger too late, only for Sophie to appear in front of him using her mirage step power. Her feet braced, she threw a punch out at the descending ball.

Ability: [Immortal Fist] (Mystic)

- Special ability.
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 2 (14%).

- Effect (iron): Unarmed attacks deal additional resonating-force damage, which is highly effective against physical defences. Suffer no damage from making unarmed strikes against objects and negate all damage from actively intercepted attacks. Not all damage from very powerful or higher-ranked attacks will be negated.

The huge metal sphere was deflected but the power of it was too much for Sophie's ability to negate. She was hammered into the stone, bouncing off herself as her arm was brutally mangled. Jason, protected and recovered, looked down at her. Under the hood of his cloak, his face contorting with malevolence as he saw what was left of her arm. He turned that gaze onto the golem, the sword in his hand practically humming with power, even as blood from Jason's punctured arm ran down it.

He ran at the golem, having fought it enough to know that its ungainly size and sluggish speed were the weaknesses he needed. His sword flashed as his body danced,

slicing into the creature again and again. With each strike the damage grew greater while the golem flailed at the cloaked figure flittering around its feet. Soon, even bronze-rank damage resistance was not enough. Jason had burned most of his mana on special attacks it was immune to, trigger the sword until every strike was blasting away chunks of wood and shearing apart strips of metal. He went for the joints, the legs first, then the arms as it toppled, finally going to work on every part of it still large enough to hit.

➤ You have defeated [Siege Golem].

Jason dropped his sword on the destroyed golem, rushing over to Sophie. She was struggling, one-armed, to get to her knees and he carefully helped and she grimaced silently through the pain. Her right arm dangled limply, the hand coming out of her sleeve. Jason pulled the lesser miracle potion from his belt but she waved him off.

“I’d be a pancake if it wasn’t for you,” he said, still pushing it on her.

“That’s for the middle of a fight,” she snarled through the pain and clenched teeth. “Don’t be an idiot and waste it now. I can use this to practice my recovery power.”

Jason looked at her as she fought through the pain to take a kneeling meditation pose as best she could.

Ability: [Equilibrium] (Balance)

- Special ability.
 - Cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 1 (76%)

 - Effect (iron): Meditate to slowly accrue instances of [Integrity], up to an instance threshold based on the [Recovery] attribute. Instances quickly drop off when meditation ends.

 - [Integrity] (heal-over-time, mana-over-time, stamina-over-time, holy): Periodically recover a small amount of health, stamina and mana. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

“At least take some kind of potion,” Jason said.

“This is kind of hard, so how about you shut your damn mouth for once.”

“Lady,” Jason said, putting back the lesser miracle potion and pulling out a regular healing potion for himself. “You are seriously hardcore.”

“What did I just say?”

Chapter 159: Mixed Medication

Sophie's arm was more serious than any of Jason's wounds. Her arm was severely damaged, requiring an extended period to heal back up with her self-recovery power. Jason had been needled quite badly but it only took a few potions to eliminate the minor, if numerous wounds. His blood harvest power normally allowed him to heal up after fights using the remnant life force of fallen enemies, but it only worked on enemies with blood. The siege golem was largely impervious to Jason's abilities, even after being destroyed.

The puncture points in his armour were slowly recovering as well, due to his armour's self-repair properties. Gary's advice to find armour with that particular quality had saved Jason a good amount of money on repairs. Now he was isolated from a place to get repairs, it was all the more valuable.

Sophie's healing power was meditation-based and concentrating was proving difficult with the state of her arm. She took regular breaks, panting and sweating in spite of doing no more than sitting in place. Jason tried to distract her from the pain each time she took a break.

"I'm going to loot the monster, now you're not in the middle of meditating," he told her during the first break. "I didn't want to interrupt you, before."

He wandered over to the fallen golem, which didn't look much worse than when it had been mimicking a broken siege weapon. He placed a hand on a chunk of shattered wood.

➤ Would you like to loot [Siege Golem]?

"Head's up," he warned Sophie as he walked away. The golem started dissolving into rainbow smoke.

-
- [Meteor Hammer] has been added to your inventory.
 - [Monster Core (Bronze Rank)] has been added to your inventory.
 - 10 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.

 - [Siege Grips] have been awarded to party member [Sophie Wexler].
 - 10 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been awarded to party member [Sophie Wexler].
 - 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been awarded to party member [Sophie Wexler].
-

Sophie ducked out of the way as two bags of coins dropped from where they appeared over her head with a flash of rainbow light. There was also a pair of gloves, which she picked up to examine.

Item: [Siege Grips] (bronze rank, rare)

A pair of combat gloves containing the power of a siege weapon (clothing, gloves).

- Effect: Add explosive power to a physical attack, inflicting additional resonating-force damage and creating a powerful knock-back effect. 20 second cooldown.
 - Effect: Conjure a ram that flies through the air to make an extremely heavy resonating force attack. 5 minute cooldown.
 - You do not meet the requirements to use this item.
-

“I got bronze-rank gloves,” she said. “What about you?”

“A ball and chain,” Jason said, showing her the weapon in his hands. It was, as he said, a metal sphere at the end of a chain. Like a smaller version of the ball-hand of the siege golem, the metal orb was pitted with rust.

Item: [Meteor Hammer] (bronze rank, uncommon)

A magical chain weapon taken from an animate siege weapon (weapon, chain).

- Effect: Inflicts additional resonating-force damage based on how long the meteor hammer was swinging prior to the attack.
 - Effect: Chain length can be extended or retracted as it swings.
 - You do not meet the requirements to use this item.
-

“I don’t think this really suits me,” Jason said. “It’s bronze-rank anyway.”

“So are these but I could see myself using them later.”

Jason stashed the items and Sophie’s coins in his inventory. He glanced down at her arm, still hanging limp, her hand purple and distended. She was careful to jostle it as little as possible when she moved.

“How’s that coming along?” he asked.

“Not much progress on the arm,” she said unhappily. “I’m feeling better otherwise, though. That big ball thing really hit hard.”

“Thank you for that, by the way,” Jason said. “I don’t think I would have taken the hit nearly as well.”

“This is going to take longer to heal than I thought,” she said. “Maybe I should take a potion. Not one of the good ones, just a regular healing potion.”

“No, you were right in the first place,” Jason said. “Healing it up will be good training for your ability and we have time to burn. You hole up in the courtyard here while I check out the rest of the building. I’ll look for a good spot to set up camp. Use voice chat if anything happens and I’ll come running.”

“Alright,” Sophie said. She went back to meditating as Jason went further into the building.

Jory wasn’t happy. He had only agreed to participate as part of a joint activity between the craft associations, only to be immediately separated from his assigned team. As people formed makeshift groups from the people they found themselves with on the tower, Jory didn’t exactly have his pick of teams. His alchemy-related essence abilities made for a certain amount of healing but the people assembling groups were competing to attract the more conventional healers.

Jory was geared out in a heavy coat, covered in pockets. It was enchanted to protect both him and the contents of the pockets from harm. Fortunately for Jory, it was also enchanted to keep him cool, despite the jacket being as thick as the humidity. Along with the jacket, Jory had two belts around his waist and two bandoliers across his chest. They were full of vials containing potions and reagents Jory could use his essence abilities on to make potions on the fly. Like his coat, the belts and bandoliers were enchanted to protect their contents. Slung over his shoulder was a dimensional bag satchel.

The group Jory ended up with clearly viewed him as a better than nothing option, but they were the most seemingly capable group left. The best people had already formed teams and headed off. The group Jory joined at least had three members from the same team, a trio of leonids who had the luck of arriving on the same tower. They then added Jory and a solid guardian-type named Keane who could conjure heavy armour and a huge shield.

If they weren’t so clearly disgruntled at not getting a better healer, Jory would have been fairly happy. As it was, he was regretting the entire enterprise until they encountered the strange personage of Shade. Jory wanted to take him up on his offer to explain the place they found themselves, but the rest of his group were eager to press on. The three leonids all chose courage, while Jory and Keane chose wisdom.

The lesser miracle potion Shade gave him was an object of fascination for Jory, who had an essence ability that allowed him to determine its effects. His intention was to take it

back to his workshop and see what he could learn from it. He wouldn't be able to reproduce it from a sample, but he had no doubt that anything he could glean from it would be invaluable.

Of the leonids, the leader was named Laramie. He and his fellows were in no rush to reach the centre of the city, more interested in the search for treasures. Every building they spotted that looked mostly intact was a prime target.

Jory was initially annoyed but was forced to acknowledge their choice was a good one as they dug out more than a few worthwhile finds. The advantage of magical items was that they stood out, having withstood the passage of time better than ordinary objects.

The leonids gave themselves first pick, but otherwise distributed the loot evenly. They found a magical box of unknown purpose, a magical staff that Jory claimed, some leather armguards and no less than four awakening stones. They were mostly commons, but the plant, snake and earth awakening stones were all desirable enough to sell well. The one rare stone, an awakening stone of ruin, would sell the best though, inevitably ending up in Laramie's possession.

Jory's essence ability that identified items revealed the properties of each, aside from the magical box that eluded his ability's power. All it revealed was the name of the item which was, appropriately enough, mystery box. Jory could have used his ability to undersell the value of the rare awakening stone but his ethical nature never led him to even consider it. He was satisfied enough with the loot sharing that he was happy to continue on.

Trouble came when they searched what turned out to be a sprawling, multistorey alchemy workshop. Even with the expansive renovations on his own workshop and the dilapidated nature of the building, Jory couldn't help but be envious. He even managed to dig out a few magical alchemy tools that found their way into his dimensional bag. The others didn't begrudge him as they would be hard to sell and gave them an excuse to cut him out of the next round of loot. They told him that anything alchemy related was all his. This lasted until Jory's honest nature caused him to reveal a discovery.

Inside a magical cabinet sealed to protect the contents from the elements, Jory found a whole catalogue of alchemical formulas. Many were out of date compared to superior modern equivalents, or used ingredients too expensive or rare for what the potions did. There were a few gems amongst them, however, and one huge prize. The requirements and ingredients were outrageous in both rarity and price, but there was a complete formula

for the lesser miracle potion Shade had given him. When he revealed this fact, Laramie immediately demanded he hand it over.

“You said everything alchemy-related was mine,” Jory told them.

“That was before you found something so valuable,” Laramie said. “Hand it over.”

“You three have already been taking the most valuable goods for yourselves,” the heavily-armoured shield-bearer said. “We agreed he could have the alchemy stuff, so you should stick to the deal you made.”

He had been quietly stewing over what he saw as unfair loot distribution and used their move on Jory as a chance to push the issue. They were still in the alchemy building, in a large room once used for the preparation of alchemical components, with a series of long benches dividing the room.

“The deal has changed,” Laramie said.

Jory watched as the two men squared off.

“Let’s just keep talking,” Jory said. “There are monsters enough out there, without us fighting one another.”

“There’s no need to fight,” Keane said, the big man’s eyes not leaving Laramie. “They just have to give you what they promised.”

“I promise I’ll put a hole right through that helmet if you don’t back off,” Laramie said. The Leonids were all-powerful damage dealers.

The three squared off against one, with Jory in the background, his calls for de-escalation going unheeded. The tension ramped until one of the three finally twitched, lashing out with a conjured whip of fire. The other two were only a beat behind, their coordination proving too much of an onslaught for Keane.

His defensive powers were strong but it was three against one, with the trio's practised teamwork overwhelming the protector. He held out briefly under a terrifying barrage as Jory yelled at them to stop, but soon he fell to the ground. Most adventurers would have died but Keane was only debilitated, his wounded flesh already starting to heal itself. Laramie turned his attention back to Jory.

“I’ll hand it over,” Jory said. “Just take it and go while I look after him.”

“You had your chance,” Laramie said. “Now you’re going to be unfortunate victims of the many dangers, here.”

“You don’t need to-”

Jory’s fruitless words were cut off by a spear made of solid stone being launched at him. To his surprise, a bubble-shield snapped up around him, disappearing again as it absorbed the spear’s attack.

“There’s no reasoning with some people,” Neil Davone said, stepping into the room. A golem made of dull glass stepped in ahead of him, Neil’s chrysalis golem summon put itself between the trio and Neil, who grabbed Jory and yanked him behind a bench. “Time to go, Jory.”

“Davone? I’m not leaving that guy to them,” Jory said, pointing at Keane, whose sprawled feet they could just see past the edge of the bench.

“Don’t fight it, Jory,” Laramie called out. “Your friend isn’t going to save you.”

“The hell I’m not,” Neil told Jory with quiet insistence. “I can’t do anything about the guy on the ground, though, unless you have some awesome power that will let you fight all those guys by yourself.”

Jory grimaced.

“If that’s what it takes. The after-effects are bad, though, so you’ll have to take care of me.”

“Wait, you seriously have something like that?”

“Yes,” Jory said soberly. “I don’t like to use it, though.”

“I think now might be the time you’ve been saving it for,” Neil said.

Jory held his hands out and vials started floating out of their loops on his belt, floating in the air. The vials started opening, spilling their contents into the air. Instead of dropping to the ground, they flowed together into a sphere of liquid that grew darker as each new ingredient was added. As they did, Jory pulled off his coat and unbuckled his belts and bandoliers, even as more vials flew out of them to disgorge their contents into the air.

Attacks were now lancing into the glass golem, chunks shattering off it as they did. With every piece of damage, runes were engraved onto its surface. It didn’t fight back, remaining steadfastly planted between its attackers and Neil.

“I thought it was a really bad idea to mix potions like that,” Neil said, watching all the liquids and powers from the vials splash together in front of them.

“It is,” Jory said.

“So why are you doing it?”

“To show those idiots what happens when you push an alchemist into using a very bad idea.”

The liquid started streaming into Jory’s waiting mouth. Immediately, from the head down, Jory’s body started grossly distending. His whole body grew, his skin turning a patchy mishmash of sickly yellow, purple, blue and green. His hair fell out and his head bulged out like the rest of his body, now too large to hide behind the bench. He was unrecognisable as Jory, now just a monster of muscle.

A bolt of flame struck him, releasing a stench of acrid chemicals and burning flesh, which Jory didn't seem to notice. A stone spear pierced his torso, which he dismissively yanked out, throwing it back with the force of a ballista. Then he picked up the bench in front of him and threw that too, despite it being affixed to the floor. Accompanied by the sound of shattering tiles, he ripping it right off the floor and hurled it at the leonids.

Neil watched the process with horrified fascination. The three adventurers scrambled out the door on the other side of the room. Monster Jory moved after them in a lumbering pursuit but not at a pace likely to catch them.

Jason led Sophie through the building. Day had turned to night as Sophie worked to heal herself, Jason wondering how the sun worked in the astral space. Her arm wasn't fully recovered but she had control over it again and her hand looked like a hand instead of a potato someone had taken to with a hammer. She couldn't see in the dark like Jason, so she had a glow-stone floating over her head.

"Did you find anything, searching the building?" she asked.

"I did," Jason said. "I found an armoury with a couple of magic weapons, although they were fairly mediocre. More importantly, I found an awakening stone."

"You did?"

"It's an uncommon one," he said. "Awakening stone of preparation. I know the others said to just collect what you can so you can choose which ones to use after, but maybe you could use just one."

"You think I should?"

"Probably not, but I would. I can do the ritual in the morning if you like. Give it some thought, overnight."

They reached where Jason had set up the aura tent, which would mask their presence from most monsters. He had also set up some alarm rituals, just in case. It was on the top floor of the building, close to the steps leading up to the roof.

"I only set up the one tent," he said, "but I can put the other one up if you want."

"It's fine," Sophie said. "Just know that if you get handsy, you aren't getting those hands back."

Chapter 160: Giving People Choices

Sophie awoke to enticing breakfast smells. She was aching and tired, her damaged arm having given her a restless night. Only in the last few hours did she snatch away some precious, uninterrupted slumber. She crawled delicately out of the tent and followed the smells up a stone stairwell and onto a flat roof. Jason had set out a folding camp table and pair of chairs, one of which he was sitting in.

“Morning,” he greeted her. “Join me?”

He gestured at the other chair with a fork, on the end of which was skewered a piece of sausage. The rest of the sausage was on a plate in front of him, along with poached eggs and hot, buttered toast. As she sat down, he pulled a second plate of food from his inventory, as fresh and hot as the moment he put it there. A pitcher of juice was already out, Jason filling an empty glass to match his own.

“This is surreal,” Sophie said. “I can more or less accept the whole adventuring life. Magic powers, alternate dimensions, astral spaces. Monsters, cultists, even an ancient order of assassins. Yet somehow, seeing you sitting in the middle of it all, comfortably eating breakfast is just too much.”

“Believe it or not, you aren’t the first woman to tell me I was too much.”

“Oh, I believe it,” she said and took a sip of juice. “That’s really good.”

“It’s a blend of delta fruits. I bought a bunch of it from Arash.”

“The guy who sells juice from a cart and keeps calling you a heretic?”

“That’s the one.”

“So when you making preparations to enter this unexplored astral space full of unknown dangers, you went with picnic furniture, plates of hot breakfast and pitchers of fruit juice.”

“Life isn’t for surviving, Wexler. Life is for living.”

Jason had set up the table to overlook the street below. The building was quite high, as were many of the other nearby buildings. It turned the overgrown boulevard they had been walking down into something of a jungle canyon. Jason looked it over with a smile as he sipped at his juice.

“You really like this, don’t you?” Sophie asked him.

“I do,” he said. “I get what you mean about everything being crazy but my advice to you is to surrender to it. I know you’ve spent a lot of time wondering why I helped you so much when I could have gotten you out of the city and been done with it. It wasn’t long ago that I was the one sitting at a table with a more experienced adventurer, no idea what lay

ahead and wondering what to do. He helped me realise that I had a chance to start things fresh. To become the person I wanted to be.”

He smiled in reminiscence.

“Give yourself over to the experience, Wexler. This is your chance to take control. The river may be raging but you’ll be amazed how fast you go working with the flow, instead of against it.”

“That seems strange, coming from you,” she said. “I’ve never met a person who went more against the flow in my life.”

“It’s about picking your moments,” Jason said. “I came into this world with the naivety of someone who lived his life in safety. I’ve had a lot of illusions shattered, about the world and about myself. But sometimes when the world tries to bend you, you have to stand straight until one of you breaks.”

“You think the world will break before you do?”

“Probably not. But there’s no chance if I don’t try. I decided early on that with my second chance, the one regret I would never have is that I never tried. So I do the things that feel right. When I heard about your situation, I felt for you and Belinda. I know what it’s like to be in an untenable situation. I found friends to guide me out. I know Jory wanted to help you, so I gave the help I had. Now I’m giving you the advice I received. Take this chance to be who you want to be.”

“And if I don’t know who that is?”

“You do, on some level. Just do what feels right until you figure it out. It’s what I’ve been doing and I don’t regret any of it, mistakes and all.”

He gestured at the astral space around the with his fork.

“In my old life, I never had the chance to visit places like this. Yes, this world has brought its share of challenges, but facing those challenges has been more fulfilling than anything in my old life. At some point, I’ll be going back to my world but I’m not going to put this world behind me when I do. There’s a means to travel between worlds and I’m going to find it.”

“How?”

“I’ve been talking with Clive, him being the expert. These builder cultists seem to have more advanced astral magic than this world does. Clive thinks they have some means of crossing dimensional boundaries that doesn’t require a diamond ranker, or they wouldn’t have so many agents here to be active all over the world. If I can get a hold of their magic, it may well put me on the right path, if not deliver what I need on a platter.”

“A way home.”

“No,” Jason said. “A way here. I’ve been told that I will be going home, sooner or later. I can’t help but feel that I need to go back and deal with the things I left behind. Once I have, though, I’m coming back to this world, even if that trip is one way. My old world is my past, and while I’m compelled to settle that past, this world is my future.”

“And if you can’t find a way back?”

“The thing I realised when I truly came to accept that magic is real is that the impossible is just a limitation I put on my own thinking. If you have the time and the resolve, you can do just about anything. But you already know that.”

“I do?”

“Of course you do. You were in an awful position. Caught between two crime lords and a powerful aristocrat, with none of the connections and power I’ve been enjoying since coming to this world. All you had was a loyal friend. Most people would have capitulated. Found the least awful path and accepted their fate. Not you and not Belinda. You came up with a plan and you threw yourselves into it.”

“It probably wouldn’t have worked, even without your interference.”

“But it could have and you went for it. You saw that glimpse of light that most other people would have dismissed as unreachable and you reached for it. I really admire that.”

He held his glass up in a casual salute.

“Thank you,” she said uncertainly, shifting in her chair. “I don’t... not a lot of people look at me for who I am. My whole life, men have looked at me like an animal they need to break in.”

Jason nodded.

“I have this philosophy in life,” he said. “My brother always had this knack for fitting in. For becoming what he needed to be, but I can’t do that. Every time I tried I ended up losing it and doing something crazy and self-destructive. So, I decided early on that I was going to be who I am and people could take it or leave it. Like me or hate me, I’ll take passion over ambivalence. It lets me know who to avoid and who to be friends with. It makes for a better life.”

“But a lot of times you must have to deal with people who don’t like you.”

“Of course,” Jason said. “I’m from a whole other world, so people were always going to find me strange. I just play that up sometimes to disorient them a bit. If you need to tip someone over, it helps to unbalance them first.”

“I don’t know I entirely believe that,” she said.

“Oh?”

“I’ve been watching you and I’m willing to bet you’re strange, even where you come from. If it was all an act, you wouldn’t be the same around your friends as your enemies.”

“It’s not an act,” Jason said. “I told you that I’m just being who I am and people can take it or leave it. I just crank it up or dial it back a bit for any given situation.”

“And that works?”

“When you take a very specific approach to things, the way I do, you have to accept that some people will respond to it and others will reject it wholesale. It’s a numbers game and you have to accept that a certain number of people are going to tell you to sod off. Some people like what I’m selling, others can’t stand it. I work with the ones that do and don’t bother with the ones that don’t.”

“It sounds like you're just making excuses for doing whatever you like,” Sophie said.

“Oh, I’m absolutely doing that,” Jason said. “I told you it’s a life philosophy. I’ve just found out how to make it work.”

“By manipulating people.”

“You say that like we don't all do it every day. We all put up fronts, adjust who we are, how much we show of ourselves to the different people around us. I just do it more consciously than most. Take Neil, for example. When I went to recruit him, I could have taken a different approach. Presented something more universally appealing to get him on board. Instead, I showed him who I was, cranked up a bit to make the point. I figured he was more likely to turn us down than join but I didn’t want the best person we could find for our team; I wanted the best fit. So I presented a certain version of myself, not to get him on board but to help him decide if the place he wanted to be was with us.”

“You gave me that choice too, didn’t you? Join your merry band of misfits or vanish into some distant land to start over.”

“I like giving people choices.”

“That’s because you like control. If you're the one giving the choices, you get to decide what the choices are. Otherwise, people might go finding their own options that don't fit your narrative.”

Jason chuckled, not denying it.

“How’s the arm?” he asked.

“Not fighting strength but a couple more hours using my meditation power should do it.”

“So now you’ve experienced the power of a bronze-rank monster,” Jason said.

“According to Rufus, a good adventurer should be able to handle monsters one rank up, so long as the match-up is good. Meaning only pick fights with the big ones when your powers counter theirs.”

They started discussing the fight, their teamwork in confusing the unintelligent monster to keep it stuck in the doorway. They discussed what they did well, what could

have been improved. Jason was impressed with Sophie's ability to break down the fight, find the errors and look at how to correct them.

"My big mistake," Jason said, "was getting into a mindset of my powers not working on it. My execute power would have worked just fine but I'd fallen into the trap of dismissing the effectiveness of my abilities. When I was first training, one of the things Rufus said was to think about what every ability can do and how to use each one effectively in a situation."

"My mistake was trying to counter such an obviously powerful attack," Sophie said. "I should have hit you instead."

"What?" Jason asked.

"I could have knocked you out of the way," she said.

"Oh, right."

After breakfast, Jason started packing everything into his inventory.

"Did you decide if you wanted to use that awakening stone?" Jason asked.

"I don't think I will," Sophie said. "I don't think this is the best situation to break-in a completely new power."

"That's sensible."

Jason continued packing up. Sophie didn't have a dimensional bag of her own, yet. She wanted something that wouldn't impede her very mobile fighting style, much like Emir's dimensional storage jacket. Something like that was hard to find, locally. So, for the moment, she was relying on Jason the way Gary and Rufus had done with Farrah.

Sophie settled into a meditation pose as Jason went downstairs. Pausing at the top of the stairwell, he called out to Sophie.

"Hey, Wexler."

"What?"

"Thanks for stopping my head from getting smeared across the floor."

He went down the stairs before she could reply. He negated the alarm rituals he put in place and packed up the aura tent. Then he went up and joined Sophie, who had settled herself on the edge of the roof. They sat, meditating side by side. Eventually, a smile crept over Jason's mouth as he experienced a breakthrough.

-
- Ability [Midnight Eyes] (Dark) has reached Iron 8 (100%).
 - Ability [Midnight Eyes] (Dark) has reached Iron 9 (00%).
-

As a perception power, midnight eyes was the ability Jason was always using and for this reason, it had advanced the most quickly. Like his other abilities, though, it had slowed

to a crawl as it drew closer to reaching bronze rank. Despite not being a big part of the fight, taking on a bronze-rank monster had helped it edge up the wall.

After almost two hours, Sophie declared her arm fully restored. To test it, she and Jason did some sparring on the open space of the roof. Sophie had been trained hard since becoming an adventurer but it was not a one-way street. Having someone with her skill who understood his style better than he did was immensely useful for Jason. She had pushed him to use it not just for escapes and sneak attacks but to become stronger in a straight-up fight.

Before he ever met Sophie, Jason had already been working on a deceptive style that baited out the enemy. What Sophie had pointed out was that Jason was massively wasting what could be one of his best combat abilities: his cloak. Because it only had physical substance when he wanted, it could obscure his movements without obstructing them. What's more, the ability to be real or insubstantial at will offered powerful utility.

Using his cloak to hide his stance, Jason feinted a forward motion, only to duck back as Sophie threw out a fist to counter and wrap her arm in his cloak. He yanked her forward, pulling her arm out of the way as he stepped in with a rising knee. She couldn't see it coming but anticipated the move, halting Jason's rising knee with a leg block before it gathered force. She yanked back on her arm and he let the cloak become insubstantial. Without the resistance she used too much force, briefly stumbling back. It was only a moment of lost balance but Jason moved in to capitalise.

Soon after, Jason was sprawled face down on the rooftop.

"You did well," Sophie said. "You're improving."

"Then why does it feel like I'm getting worse?" he groaned.

"You're getting better but I'm also learning how you fight," she said. "Given that I know your style and have been doing this a lot longer, it only makes sense that I'll improve against you faster than you do against me."

"Doesn't that mean you should take it easy on me?" he asked as he pushed himself to his feet.

"Probably," she acknowledged. "Something about hitting you repeatedly is really satisfying, though."

"Thanks," he said, disgruntled look. "I'm glad you can use me for your personal gratification."

He started stripping off his clothes, taking out some healing unguent to rub into the muscles Sophie had tenderised.

"You're very skinny she said, unashamedly looking him over as he stood there in his boxer shorts."

“Are you kidding?” Jason asked, looking himself over. “I’ve totally filled out. I used to be way skinnier than this.”

“You did? Do come from a race of twig people?”

“No!”

“You seem very defensive,” she said. “You’re a twig person, aren’t you?”

“I’m not a twig person! I’m a regular person!”

“Uh-huh.”

“Yeah, well, you aren’t so great, with your...”

He waved his arm up and down at her lithe body, her caramel skin set off by the matching silver of her eyes and hair.

“...how is that fair,” he finished limply. “I’m going to put my clothes back on now.”

“What are those things on your shorts?”

“Love hearts,” Jason said.

“That’s not what a heart looks like.”

“How do you know what a heart looks like?” Jason asked. “You don’t strike me as someone who took lessons on internal anatomy.”

“I did, after a fashion,” she said. “A few years back, during my first time in the fighting pits, there was a guy who would rip people’s hearts out and eat them. He had some power where it made him stronger.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“And they let him participate?”

“It got the crowd riled up.”

“They surely wouldn’t just let that go on, would they?”

“The idea was to build up tension,” she said. “They threw in scrubs to fight him, get some interest in the lower card fight before putting him up against real fighters. Kind of a ‘who can take down the monster’ situation.”

“So he was killed in the arena?”

“No, the Adventure Society came in and did it. Turns out they don’t like essence abilities that require you to eat people’s hearts.”

Chapter 161: A Well-Informed Man

The City of Fallen Echoes was teeming with monsters. On their second day, Jason and Sophie had an encounter almost hourly as they made their way. Sometimes they followed streets, other times they went across rooftops. Either way, there was no shortage of monsters willing to come after them.

There were similarities between the jungle-covered city and the delta where they usually hunted monsters, with the muggy heat and the lush plant life. The monsters they encountered were similar, if not the same. They fought snake monsters, spider monsters and, especially unpleasant, a snake-spider the size of a transit van that slithered on its hairy abdomen and had eight snake heads instead of limbs.

The big difference between fighting monsters in the delta was in numbers. The magically-saturated astral space produced far more monsters than the outside world. Jason and Sophie had already realised this, but as they surveilled their potential next encounter, the point was really rammed home.

Crouched on a rooftop, Jason and Sophie looked down at a teeming mass of margolls. They had both handled the dog-headed humanoids in the past, but they were looking at a throng of monsters four times the size of a normal pack.

"I count forty-one," Jason said quietly. From six storeys up they had a good vantage. There was little breeze to carry their scent and the poor eyesight of the creatures made being spotted unlikely. The ravenous creatures had just taken down a smaller group of monsters and were loudly feasting on the bodies, jostling for position around the corpses.

"That was my count, too," Sophie said. "What do you think?"

"Honestly? I want to try it. We have to do it right, though. If we just fight them on the street they'll overrun us."

"You're looking at that building, across the way?"

"I am," Jason said. "We complicate the environment. Bottlenecks, escape paths. Bunch them up until their numbers help us more than hurt us."

"How do you want to lure them?" Sophie asked.

"They're aggressive, relentless and not all that bright. I say we just drop down and run straight in. They'll chase us all through the building and we escape from the roof if it gets too much."

"Split up or stick together?" she asked.

"Lady's choice."

“Split up. I’ll do better finding a choke point and holding my ground, while you’ll do better on the move.”

“Sounds good,” Jason said. “Just make sure you always have an exit and keep in touch through the voice chat. Calculate your risk.”

They leapt off the building, drifting over the street to land in front of the one they had chosen on the other side. The margolls smelled them before they landed and were already looking around as they touched down and rushed for the building. They dashed through the open doorway into darkness, Jason immediately vanishing as Sophie made for a set of stone stairs that rose along one wall. Everything else in the large room had long since rotted away, except vines and mushrooms that thrived in shadows more than the bright sun outside.

Stopping halfway up the stairs, Sophie turned and began a slow, fighting retreat. The margolls were forced to face her two at a time, the rest stuck crowding behind. She fearlessly met the attack of their huge claws, and powerful jaws, trusting her powers to shield whatever body part she used to block. She retaliated with brutal punches and savage kicks, sending crippled margolls tumbling off the side of the stairs. When she bought herself some room she would send a wind blade slicing its way down the stairs, the monsters shoving for position had no space to dodge.

The margolls gathered at the bottom of the stairs howled their frustration as they pushed each other in the race for prey. Some swiped at each other with their wicked claws as they fought for access to the stairs, others tried climbing the vines growing on the side of the stairs. The dark interior of the building was not as overgrown as the exterior, but there was growth enough that some of them eventually made their way up. Sophie kicked them back down as their heads popped up over the side of the stairs but it drew her attention from the monsters in front of her. Unwilling to let herself be flanked, she backed up the stairs to the next level, where she fled in search of a new bottleneck.

In the large room, the margolls left at the back started to notice something wrong. They were catching snatches of a scent that vanished as quickly as it appeared. They noticed one of their number, dead on the ground, far from the commotion of where the woman was kicking them back down the stairs. A second backline margoll fell dead with no more sound than its body hitting the ground and a third soon followed.

Margolls had poor eyesight, relying much more on their sense of smell. Having just come in out of the bright sun, their vision was all the worse. Several more of their number were silently slain before they noticed the dark figure moving amongst them, appearing and disappearing just as quickly.

The monsters milled in confusion. Their baseline aggression, their large numbers in a relatively tight space and the frustration of enemies they couldn't pin down were becoming a toxic brew as some of them started turning on one another. If it weren't for Sophie being forced to fall back, letting the monsters vent up the stairs in pursuit, the margolls may well have killed each other.

Sometime later, Sophie and Jason were on the rooftop, fighting the last of the margolls. Despite having their numbers whittled down as they pursued the pair through the building, the savage monsters never faltered in their furious assault until the last of them had fallen. Jason and Sophie then made their way down through the building, finishing off those too crippled to continue the chase. Jason touched each one to tag it for looting.

➤ *Would you like to loot [Margoll]?*

He would only accept once they were away from the bodies and the stink they would produce as they dissolved. As they scoured the building, Jason made a pleasant discovery. A dark cube lay in an alcove under a stairwell, in a place that the light outside would never reach. If it weren't for his ability to see in the dark, he would have never seen it at all.

Item: [Dark Essence] (unranked, uncommon)

Manifested essence of darkness (consumable, essence).

- *Requirements: Less than 4 absorbed essences.*
 - *Effect: Imbues 1 awakened dark essence ability and 4 unawakened dark essence abilities.*
 - *You have absorbed 4/4 essences.*
 - *You do not meet the requirements to use this item.*
-

"Nostalgic," he mused to himself.

"What's that?" Sophie asked, walking up to him.

"I found an essence," Jason said. "It's a dark essence, which was my first."

"Should go for a good price, right?"

"It should," Jason said. "It's only uncommon and there'll probably be a glut of essences on the market after all this, but dark is a popular one. It has great utility and is the last word in stealth essences. You should take it when we split up the loot after all this

is done. The essences Belinda wants are all common, so you can probably trade this for two of them, or at least the magic essence and some solid awakening stones.”

They went out on the street, in front of the building, before Jason accepted all the loot messages. Soon, rainbow smoke was streaming out of windows from the plume rising up of the building generated by all 41 bodies being converted at once.

-
- 41 [Monster Cores (Iron)] have been added to your inventory.
 - 410 [Iron Rank Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 60 [Dog Quintessence Gems] have been added to your inventory.
 - 10 [Myriad Quintessence Gems] have been added to your inventory.
-
- 410 [Iron Rank Spirit Coins] have been awarded to party member [Sophie Wexler].
 - 60 [Dog Quintessence Gems] have been awarded to party member [Sophie Wexler].
 - 10 [Myriad Quintessence Gems] have been awarded to party member [Sophie Wexler].
-

Sophie stepped back, her loot-dodge timing having improved enough that the three bags fell to the ground in front of her.

“So, your power conjured the bags, right?” she asked.

“Yep,” Jason said. “As I understand it, a looting power like mine or Neil’s takes the magic from the monster as it merges with the ambient magic and makes items with it. Usually magical manifestations like spirit coins or these quintessence gems we just got, but sometimes items.”

“Belinda said Clive spent a whole day examining one of those bags to see if there was anything special about it.”

“That does sound like him,” Jason said.

Sophie opened up one of the bags, taking out a quintessence gem to examine. It was like a diamond, almost spherical but covered in tiny facets.

Item: [Myriad Quintessence] (iron rank, legendary)
Manifested essence of multiplicity. (crafting material, essence).

- Effect: Crafting material for items with multiplicative attributes.
-

“Pretty,” Jason said as she held it up for him to see. It caught the bright sunlight, refracting rainbow colours.

“Legendary rarity,” she said. “Should be valuable, right?”

“I imagine so,” Jason said. “The myriad essence is legendary, too. Emily, the archer from Beth Cavendish’s team has it.”

“She’s the celestine?” Sophie asked.

“That’s right.”

Sophie dropped the gem back into the bag and handed her loot to Jason for storage. He took out a notebook and recorded all the loot for splitting up later. As he wrote in it, Sophie craned her head back to watch the rainbow smoke from more than forty monsters rising up from the building.

“All those monsters,” she said. “It’s like this place has a monster surge going on.”

“It essentially does,” Jason said, putting his notebook away. “A monster surge is a weeks-long increase in magical saturation.”

“You haven’t experienced one, right?” she asked. “They don’t have them in your world?”

“We don’t have monsters at all,” Jason said. “I’ve only been learning about how they work studying astral magic with Clive. I hope he’s doing alright.”

Clive had become worried once he realised that none of his team had arrived with him through the archway. As people started forming makeshift teams, he didn’t expect to find anyone looking for his eclectic selection of powers. His unconventional abilities worked best when used in conjunction with people who knew and were prepared for them. A hastily-formed team would do better with a ranged attacker with straightforward powers that they could readily adapt to.

He considered pulling a Jason and “adjusting” the perspective through which he described his abilities but immediately dismissed the idea. Worse than no one wanting him on their team would be getting abandoned in the middle of a monster-infested city for misrepresenting what he had to contribute.

One of the people present had the exact opposite problem. He wasn’t a large man, his slight physique reminding Clive of Jason. If the man’s blond hair and fair skin hadn’t marked him as one of the foreign adventurers, the impressive equipment Clive recognised did. Once equipment passed a certain level of expense, it started to move from ostentatious back to unremarkable, and this man’s equipment looked very unremarkable indeed. Clive knew it to be the kind of expensive that was wasted on iron-rank gear unless you had so much money to throw around it was laughable.

The man looked to be wearing light and simple clothes, but Clive picked out the subtle signs in the way the cloth draped that signalled incredibly powerful reinforcement magic. It was the kind of armour favoured by adventurers with mobility and high-skill power sets. He had a sword at his hip, with a ring at the top of the scabbard that most would

dismiss as part of the design. Clive recognised it as a magic item that would impart extra damage to the first strike after drawing the blade. The man's jacket was made of supple leather, protective without being constrictive. Clive knew from the odd way it conformed to the body shape underneath that it was a dimensional jacket, much like that used by Emir Bahadir.

The other foreign adventurers clearly knew who he was, all clamouring to form a team with him. To Clive's surprise, the man's eyes picked him out. Clive watched as the man walked away from the people inviting him to their groups and straight over to Clive.

"You're Clive Standish," the man said.

"That's right," Clive said. "I'm not sure who you are but you're wearing more expensive gear than I've seen on a bronze ranker."

The man let out a friendly chuckle.

"Which means either someone didn't trust me to survive," he said, "or thinks I'm worth it."

"You're worth it," Clive said. "If someone doesn't have the skill, you spend that money very differently."

The man laughed again and held out his hand for Clive to shake.

"I'm Valdis. You live up to your reputation, Mr Standish."

"Clive is fine," Clive said. "I have a reputation?"

"I like to keep informed. The authorities in Greenstone know a lot more about the Builder cult than most provincial areas and your contributions have been a very large part of that. Word just hasn't gotten around yet because of how closely information is being held, right now."

"But not from you, it seems," Clive said.

"My father has some small standing overseas, which affords me a little more influence than I really deserve."

"My father's an eel farmer, which affords me more long, slimy fish than I really want."

Valdis laughed once more, clearly more comfortable with their circumstances than most of the adventurers present. Clive was noticing the unhappy looks from the adventurers who had been courting Valdis' attention.

"Would you like to form a group with me, Clive?"

"I should warn you," Clive said, "my abilities can be a bit complicated. My damage comes in bursts and a lot of my abilities require anticipation and set up."

"Your confluence is the karmic essence, if I recall correctly, yes?"

“Yes,” Clive said. “You really do like to keep informed. I have some retributive damage buffs and a lot of mana recovery. Mostly I attack with staves and wands but I have a big, versatile attack spell.”

“I know someone with the karmic essence,” Valdis said. “She says that judgement and timing are the keys to success.”

“I’d have to agree,” Clive said.

“I’m a classic swordsman myself; sword, swift, adept, master. More mana-intensive abilities than you’d expect with that combo, though, so I’ll look forward to that mana recovery you mentioned. Assuming you want to join me.”

“Definitely,” Clive said.

“Great,” Valdis said, rubbing his hands together as he turned his attention to the group listening in on them. “Let’s find ourselves some team members.”

Chapter 162: The Danger is Us

In the time they had spent allowing Sophie to recover, some other groups had moved deeper into the city. They started seeing traces of that as they went, the plants and building showings traces of essence abilities having been used on them. They knew they weren't far behind another group when they found monsters that had yet to dissolve into smoke.

"Can you loot them?" Sophie asked.

"Probably not," Jason said, touching a finger to the dead monster.

➤ This monster kill was not yours. You are unable to loot this monster.

"Nope," Jason said. "It only lets me loot when the killer is me or someone in my party."

"Does Neil's ability have that restriction?"

"Not exactly, but the monster has to die inside his aura, so it works out about the same."

"Should we veer off our straight line?" Sophie asked. "We aren't going to get much training in if all the monsters we find are dead."

"May as well," Jason said. "So long as we're going more or less the right way, it should be fine."

The pair started finding their most effective tactical patterns as days passed and they encountered monsters almost hourly. It was mostly some variation on Sophie grabbing the monsters' attention while Jason moved into flank. Sometimes she would lead them around, other times standing her ground or staging running fights through buildings.

Every day in the city was like weeks of monster hunting outside it, with both Jason and Sophie unrelenting in the hunt. For Sophie, it was a chance to grab at power, both the share with Belinda and to give herself freedom from anyone who tried to control her fate.

For Jason, it was the culmination of a long wait. He had been putting off advancement and getting more awakening stones in the anticipation of Emir's grand event. He was now determined to complete his power set with the best awakening stones he could find. If nothing else, he was determined to get the necrotic damage affliction that had been absent from his kit from the beginning. Rufus kept telling him it would come, but with each new awakening stone it had remained elusive.

As the days passed, they also encountered other adventurers. None were people they knew well, if at all, but the Greenstone adventurers tended to recognise Jason, or at least his cloak. The encounters ranged from the friendly to the wary, with the foreign adventurers being especially careful.

From the brief interactions, Jason and Sophie realised the foreign adventurers were most wary of each other, with concern over rivals trying to remove the competition directly. Given that all the groups were now mixed, Jason and Sophie agreed that they were better off out of it and sticking together.

Each night, they would alternate meditating, sleeping and keeping watch. Sleep got the shortest shift, as they both had effective stamina recovery powers that kept them powering forward through the day. Not to say that there wasn't distraction in the downtime.

"What are you doing?" Sophie asked as she crawled, bleary-eyed, out of the aura tent.

"I'm trying to teach Colin to spell," Jason said. The leech collective was laid out in the shape of the word PLURB.

"I think he might be evil after all," Jason said. "He only gets the rude words right."

Their abilities improved rapidly, just the first few days seeing almost every ability Jason had advancing at least a level. His lowest abilities, his conjured dagger and his execute power, advanced twice. Sophie's abilities advanced even faster, having started off lower.

On the fifth day, they once again encountered an adventurer, but this one was dead. Sophie frowned as she crouched down to examine the body. He was a male leonid, much of his fur burned off in patches matching localised scorch marks on his clothes and skin.

"I've seen this before," she said. "Bodies, left like this."

"A monster you've seen?"

"No," she said. "A person. There's an arena fighter they call fire fist. One essence, one ability, like me. You can guess what it is from the name. He liked to play with his opponents; take his time, killing them. This is what it looked like when he did."

"You think someone did what I did, with you? Gave him the essences to become an adventurer?"

"I doubt it," she said. "The last I saw of him was when I left him dangling from a cage by his broken arms. People aren't inclined to lift up losers."

"You never actually met Thadwick Mercer, did you? I see your point, though. Maybe it was a monster with fire powers."

“I don’t think so,” Sophie said. “Enough adventurers are worried about people thinning out the competition that it’s likely a real concern. Also, I’m not sure this is an environment likely to produce fire monsters. Plus, I think this body has been stripped of magic items. The boots are gone and these clothes are under-armour padding. There isn’t any magic jewellery and no dimensional bag.”

“Fair points,” Jason said. “If he was a Greenstone adventurer, he might have just been poor. I don’t think there were any Greenstone participants who were leonids, though. They were all in the foreign group and the worst of them were equipped as well as the best local.”

“Whether a monster or a person did this,” Sophie said, “this man was mostly likely in a group. If his companions didn’t take him, they were either driven off or killed. We should look for more bodies.”

“You’re right,” Jason said. “Let’s hope we don’t find any.”

Every adventurer with a storage space or dimensional bag was carrying a number of specialised caskets for storing corpses. The Adventure Society, in acknowledgement of the risks the iron-rankers faced, had placed a reward for anyone who retrieved the remains of the fallen. The reward had been high to incentivise the return of the dead but not so high as to incentivise murder for profit.

They found a second dead leonid out on the street and a third leonid, even worse for wear than the others, in a nearby building.

“This was definitely torture,” Sophie said as they crouched over the third corpse. “There aren’t any big burns like with the other body. Whoever did this took their time.”

“Look at bruising on the wrists and ankles,” Jason said. “They were tied up. The neck, too, but not as bad. Whatever was around it was padded. Like a suppression collar.”

He stood up, frowning and Sophie did the same.

“They took this man’s powers, tied him up and then tortured him,” Jason said. “This wasn’t just taking out the competition. Whoever did this wanted something. Information?”

“There’s no way to know what the foreign adventurers have going on between them,” Sophie said. “I know you like to get your head around things but don’t get distracted by something we don’t have enough information about. For all we know, it could just be sadists getting their thrills or some weird leonid hater.”

Jason nodded. “You’re right. This is an easy place to get away with blaming the deaths on misadventure.”

“So, what do we do?” Sophie asked.

“We put him in a casket,” Jason said, “then we see if there are any more before we keep going. It’s not like we weren’t being cautious already.”

“And if whoever did this tries to do it to us? Trying to capture them and lug them around why we finish the trials and take them back won’t work.”

“No, it won’t,” Jason said. “Rufus once told me that when you’re out on an adventure, sometimes all the justice you get is putting the other guy down. So, if we get attacked, we put them down. All the way down.”

“Good,” Sophie said. “I was a little worried you’d want to try some half-measure that would put us in danger.”

“No,” Jason said grimly. “We need to make sure that the danger is us.”

The giant lizard monster lunged at Humphrey, its huge jaws open wide. Humphrey opened his own mouth in turn, fire blasting from it into the monster’s gaping maw. It wasn’t critical damage to the bronze-rank monster but the flame licking the inside of its mouth made it flinch back and snap its mouth shut. This exposed the rest of its face and Humphrey stepped forward, swinging his most powerful special attack into the side of the monster’s head, cracking bone and bursting one huge eye.

It was the turning point in the fight, the rest of the group pouring attacks into the staggered monster until it fell still.

“Impressive as expected, from Danielle Geller’s son,” Lowell said.

Lowell was one of the foreign adventurers and had the good fortune to have four of his six team members arrive on the same tower. Humphrey had joined them for the journey to the centre of the city where he could rejoin his own team but Lowell had other ideas.

“I know you have some affection for that team of locals you put together,” Lowell said, “but clearly you’re a good fit with us.”

“I’m quite happy with my current team,” Humphrey said coldly. His normal social graces were being steadily eroded by Lowell’s constant efforts at recruitment, which had moved from the oblique to the direct.

“I understand that,” Lowell said, “but to be frank, your time is wasted with the inferior team.”

“Agreed,” Humphrey snarled. “But I was separated from them by the archway, so I’ll have to make do.”

“Wait, what?” Lowell asked, his smarmy veneer cracking. “You think some grab-bag of provincials is better than us?”

“Actually,” Carly interjected, “he’s just running out of patience with you disrespecting his team. Sorry about Lowell, Humphrey. He’s a good guy but he has trouble seeing things from other people’s perspectives. He gets an idea in his head and it’s hard to dislodge.”

“Carly’s right,” Hampstead agreed. “If I was Geller, I’d have already dislodged your whole damn head, Lowell.”

“It’s fine,” Humphrey said. “Let’s just keep moving.”

Outside the astral space, Emir’s cloud palace was sitting on the lake. Rufus was with his parents, who were strongarming him into relaxing properly for the first time since Farrah died. They recruited Farrah’s parents just to make sure he had no recourse.

It was morning and they were taking tea with Emir and Constance, looking out over the lake and the picturesque towns and villages around it. The bright, lush greens of the shoreline were an appealingly stark contrast to the desert beyond. There were too many of the small communities to count, around a lake that was practically an inland sea.

“Sky Scar Lake,” Farrah’s mother, Amelia, mused. “I wonder where the name came from.”

“It’s a local legend,” Constance volunteered. “It’s said that people settled this land long ago but angered the gods, who struck them down. The force of the gods’ wrath withered the land, turning fertile ground into desert and producing the hole that became the lake as we see it today.”

“There are elements of truth to that,” Emir said. “There were indeed people who settled here long ago and they were struck down. By the churches, rather than the gods themselves, but still. Of course, the desert and the lake were already here, when this all happened.”

“I’d love to visit some more of those villages,” Amelia said. “The ones nearby have been quite delightful. It would be nice to see some not quite so thrown into a tizzy by the sudden appearance of a giant, floating palace at their doorstep.”

“You wouldn’t know it,” Rufus’ father Gabriel said, “but there is actually a less grandiose form of the palace. I’d bet Emir hasn’t used it since our adventuring days, though, back when we made him use it.”

“I’m hosting a grand event,” Emir said. “It requires grandeur.”

“Emir, you think putting on socks requires grandeur,” Gabriel said.

“That’s because I have exceptional socks,” Emir said. “It’s not my fault you don’t treat your feet with the care they deserve.”

One of Emir’s staff came in, whispering something to Constance, who frowned.

“Can I borrow Rufus for a moment?” she asked. She and Rufus were soon walking through the cloud palace together.

“What is it?” Rufus asked.

“Adric Dorgan is here,” she said.

“In person?”

“Yes.”

“He must have found something, to come in person.”

Constance led Rufus to a receiving room where Dorgan was waiting. She left the two men together and departed.

“Dorgan,” Rufus said as they sat. “I take it from your personal presence that you have something.”

“Yes and no,” Dorgan said. “Partly I came because I didn’t think they’d let any of my people through the door. I’ve been doing as you asked and I’ve definitely turned things up. I keep running into strange dead ends, however.”

“Strange how?”

“Someone is hiding things. Someone with the kind of power and influence that I would normally jump back from like a scalded snake. Even I know what’s at stake here, though, so I kept digging.”

“And?”

“And I started losing people. Someone is disappearing any of my people that touch on certain areas and they clearly don’t fear reprisal. I’m not going to keep sending people to their deaths.”

“That’s fair,” Rufus said. “So, what have you managed to get?”

“I have a lot of pieces that don’t quite fit,” Dorgan said. “Private shipping expeditions with way too much secrecy. Bribes in amounts that boggle the mind. Whole companies set up, doing one quiet job and then closing down again, all to hide whoever was really behind the deals. If you look at it all together, it very nearly adds up to something.”

“You came out here for a reason,” Rufus said. “What do you need from me?”

“I need someone to ask the questions I can’t,” Dorgan said. “To poke the dark corners my people keep vanishing into.”

“Anything more specific?”

“Whoever is covering this thing up on the top end is powerful and influential,” Dorgan said. “More than the local powers can manage because they have foreign influence and no small amount of it. I can’t go looking harder than I have into who they are. If you can find that out for me, then I can maybe put all the parts into place. I can’t look in the dark

corners, but if I know who they are, I can follow their open activities. I have enough of the shady stuff that if I know what legitimate activities to watch, I think I can bring you something you need.”

Rufus took a long, slow breath, his eyes glued to Dorgan’s face.

“I might know who you’re talking about,” Rufus said. “Nothing is confirmed, however, and telling you would be no small thing. This is information that is still very restricted and we’re keeping it that way until we have some proof. We haven’t even shared our suspicions with the Adventure Society, yet.”

Dorgan got to his feet, Rufus doing the same.

“Well, when you get around to telling people, you come see me,” Dorgan said. He took a paper folder from his jacket and handed it to Rufus.

“This is everything my people were able to find, with some observations from me about what various bits of it could mean. Until that information you’re sitting on gets a little less restricted, this is as much as I can do for you. I’m not saying I won’t help, just to be clear be clear. I’m saying I can’t.”

Rufus was leafing through the notes as Dorgan spoke. He looked up at the crime lord, giving him an assessing gaze.

“Please wait here,” Rufus said. “I’ll have some refreshments sent in while I talk to some people.”

Rufus left and when he returned, Dorgan was enjoying tea and scones.

“Dorgan,” Rufus said, without preamble. “I’m going to tell you something and you are going to do your very best in all your dealings to obfuscate the fact that I did.”

“Alright,” Dorgan said warily, putting down his teacup and getting up from his chair.

“You said you needed to know what influential power was hiding things.”

“That’s right.”

Rufus visibly steeled himself, taking a long pause before speaking again.

“Church of Purity,” he said quietly.

Dorgan’s eyes grew wider and wider as the implications of what Rufus had said settled in. He ran his hands through his hair and started pacing back and forth before he stopped and turned back to Rufus.

“What kind of madness have you dragged me into?”

Chapter 163: Surplus to Requirements

Jason and Sophie continued their way through the city. More cautious than ever, they exposed themselves to long sightlines as little as possible. Sometimes they used narrow streets to hide themselves from above, at other times, rooftops, to hide themselves from below.

Helping them remain unobtrusive was the quiet nature of their essence abilities. Only the sound burst accompanying Sophie's wind blade made any real noise and, compared to the cries of the monsters they fought, it wasn't especially loud.

The evening of the day they had found the three dead leonids, something finally happened that they had been waiting for.

-
- Party member [Neil Davone] has entered communication range.
 - Voice chat with [Neil Davone] had been restored.
 - Full [Party Interface] functionality has been restored to party member [Neil Davone].
 - Party member [Neil Davone] has been located on ability [Map].
-

"Neil?"

"Jason?"

"Good to hear from you. Are you alright?"

"Yeah. I've got Jory with me, plus another guy who's a pretty good front-line. We could use a good damage dealer, but you'll do."

"Oh, thanks for that vote of confidence. It's just me and Wexler, here. Humphrey's probably fine but I hope Clive's alright."

"Hello Sophie," Neil said.

"Neil," Sophie reciprocated. "We'll need to figure out where we each are."

"I've got that covered," Jason said.

He pulled up his map, quickly locating Neil.

"Looks like your east and a little south of us," Jason said.

"This place has an east?" Neil asked.

"It may have been arbitrarily designated by my map power, I'm not sure. Find somewhere to hole-up and We'll come to you."

Jason and Sophie reoriented themselves, heading in the direction of Neil's location on the map. They had been moving around for around ten minutes when they received a

chat from Neil. It had the whispered tone that came with a communication sent silently, via a thought.

“Someone is here,” Neil’s voice came. “From the way they’re acting, I think they were following us and got thrown when we stopped to wait for you.”

“Hang tight and we’ll get there as fast as we can,” Jason said.

“What does hang tight mean?” Neil asked.

“Come on, you can get it from context,” Jason complained.

“Clear communication is important in tactical scenario,” Neil said.

“Boys, we can sort this out later,” Sophie said. “Asano, shut up. Neil, we’ll be as quick as we can.”

Sophie and Jason gave up on stealth for speed, rushing along streets as quickly as they could. Jason was no match for Sophie’s speed, even just using her abilities passively. Once she started using them actively, navigating the complicated terrain like it was a track course, only his shadow teleporting allowed him to keep up. At each junction he checked his map and kept them on the right heading.

“They found us,” Neil said through voice chat.

“We’re getting closer,” Jason said. “A few more minutes.”

Jason and Sophie had no more speed to pour on as they raced through the overgrown streets.

“We’ve got a fire user, a wind user and a big guy with a hammer,” Neil kept them updated. “Jory is laughing like a loon for some reason I don’t under... oh, damn.”

“What happened?” Sophie asked.

“Give me a second,” Neil’s hurried voice came back.

“We’re doing okay,” Neil said a few moments later, his light with surprise. “Keane, that’s a our front-liner, is holding off their big guy just fine. “The two women with the elemental powers are throwing everything at us but Jory is soaking up all their elemental attacks and using them to fuel his own abilities. What’s that guy doing, spending his days in a clinic?”

“Just hold on,” Jason said. “We’ll be there soon.”

“Shouldn’t be an issue,” Neil said. “They just keep throwing elemental attacks... what in the world is that?”

“Neil?” Jason asked.

“The other adventurers are running,” Neil said. “There’s a wave of some ghost-looking things coming down the street. I think they might be those things the shadow guy warned us about.”

“The vorger,” Jason said.

“Yeah,” Neil said. “The people we were fighting had movement powers and bolted, but we can’t move faster than these things are going.”

“Regroup and protect each other as best you can,” Jason said. “Sophie and I should be well-equipped to handle them. Probably.”

“Probably?” Neil asked.

“It’s better than definitely not.”

Jason and Sophie spotted the vorger before they spotted Neil, Jory and the other man they picked up. The vorger looked like something between a fog bank and a swarm, their forms white and ethereal, taking all manner of shapes. Some looked like animals, others monsters or even humanoid shapes, although Shade had told them the shape didn’t matter. Whatever their form, it was the touch of the creatures that would warp and distend flesh.

Jason and Sophie got a look at the results, sprinting past what used to be a person, judging from the pieces of armour and scraps of cloth on the hideous blob of flesh. They didn’t pause, continuing the rush to help their companions.

“I think we found one of your run-off adventurers,” Jason told Neil through voice chat. “The big guy, from your description. I guess he wasn’t as fast as the others.”

In the midst of the vorger swarm, Neil was alright for the moment, but things were rapidly getting worse. His mana shield power held off any vorger who rushed at him but each time the bubble-like barrier flashed, it ate away at his mana to keep him safe. Keane had left his sword in its sheath. His hands were both occupied by a large shield, a translucent, blue object that was obviously a magical construct. He used it to intercept and push back the vorger as they swept in at him and Jory, who was crouched down beside him.

Jory’s leg had been brushed by one of the creatures and was locked into a folded position, forcing him to kneel down. In front of him, vials and little bottles were lifting themselves out of his belts and pockets, disgorging liquids and powers to float together. Unlike the black blob that had formed the last time he used the ability, this one was a shimmering, pale blue.

“I’ll show you flesh warping,” he muttered and the blob streamed into his mouth. His body grew skinny and long, his limbs stretching out. Sweat oozed out of his skin, coating him in a shimmering oil. He stood up, his elongated leg no longer afflicted. He started flailing his arms around like whips, the vorger dissolving into nothing at the touch of the oil coating Jory’s limbs.

For his part, Neil decided to act before his mana was so drained he could no longer cast spells. Even as the vorger continued lashing themselves against his mana shield he started chanting.

“Come forth, wheels of fortune; let destiny, fair and foul, be brought upon those here to receive it.”

In the air above Neil’s had, three stone wheels, translucent and immaterial, came into being. They were stack horizontally atop one another and each had a series of images inscribed on their edges. Most of the images were of vorger, but each wheel also had an image of Neil, Jory and Keane’s faces.

Ability: [Reels of Fortune] (Prosperity)

- Spell (this ability has variable subtypes, contingent on effect).
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 10 minutes.

- Current rank: Iron 7 (41%)

- Effect (iron): Conjures three immaterial reels. Channel mana into the reels to generate random effects on random individuals within the area. If an individual is affected more than once by the same use of the reels, the effect is increased for each reel.

Just conjuring the reels had eaten a good chunk of his dwindling mana and he immediately spent even more, channelling it into the reels. By their nature, the reels had mixed reliability at best, but as Neil’s mana plunged, he was betting everything on how much the vorgers’ numbers stacked the odds.

He had chosen to use the reels, not just for its potential power but because they were so outnumbered by the vorger that the odds had become skewed. This was borne out as the wheels stopped turning and the images on the front lit up, each one showing a vorger.

Strange lightning shot out of the wheels a black streak limned in white, chaining through the vorger, one to another. Each vorger struck burst into nothing, like mist under the bright sun. For each vorger that dissolved, a matching image disappeared from each of the wheels, but there were so many of them that the difference was slight. As the vorger rapidly died, Neil and everyone else was rejuvenated as the dying vorger triggered Neil’s aura power.

Ability: [Spoils of Victory] (Prosperity)

- Aura (recovery, conjuration).
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 8 (19%)

- Effect (iron): Allies within your aura recover mana and stamina for each enemy that dies within your aura, as well as a minor healing effect. You can loot enemies that die within your aura.

Neil's depleting mana was noticeably replenished as the vorger rapidly died. With his mana pool restored, Neil's mana shield was, once again, a safe refuge from the ghostly creatures. It also helped Keane, who had suffered a number of vorger strikes, in spite of his conjured shield. The healing uncramped joints that flesh-warping attacks had locked up.

Neil channelled more mana into the wheels and they started turning again.

While Neil and Jory were in the process of turning the tables, Jason and Sophie finally reached the fight, ploughing straight in at full speed. Jason's sword was already out, slashing away at the ghost-like vorger.

-
- Special attack [Leech Bite] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Vorger].
 - [Vorger] is immune to [Bleeding].
 - [Bleeding] does not take effect.

 - Affliction immunity has triggered an effect on weapon [Dread Salvation].
 - Weapon [Dread Salvation] has gained an instance of [Spell Breaker].

Instances quickly stacked up on Jason's sword and it was soon slashing apart the vorger with ease while Sophie's unarmed attacks had a similar effect. She was also seemingly impervious to the vorgers' touch, while Jason enjoyed his own protection.

-
- Special attack [Vorger's Touch] has inflicted [Vorger's Flesh Warp] on you.
 - You have resisted [Vorger's Flesh Warp].
 - [Vorger's Flesh Warp] does not take effect.
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].

As Jason and Sophie appeared in the fight, their faces also appeared on the reels, but the second turn of the spell also ended in triple vorger. This time an energy wave rolled out of the reels and touched the closest of the vorger. Its translucent body turned from

white to black, then it exploded. A nearby vorger caught in the explosion similarly started turning black and exploded in turn. The effect kept chaining until it finally petered out, the vorger spreading out until the explosions no longer caught them. Between the explosions and the previous chains of dark lightning, Neil had eradicated a full third of the vorger swarm.

The next turn of the reel rested on images of two vorger and a picture of Jory's face. An explosion in the midst of the vorger took out a further chunk of their number, although not close to as many as the three reel effects.

-
- [Human] has been affected by [Reels of Fortune]. Duration of ability [Alchemical Abomination] has been increased.
-

The vorger fought to the last but accomplished little. Jory's new form was as immune to their attacks as Jason and Sophie, all three laying into the vorger with abandon. The magical protections of Neil and the other man, Keane, still held, protecting them until the fight was over.

In the end, Jason and Sophie felt rather surplus to requirements. They shredded their share of the ghost creatures but most were eradicated by Neil's spell, followed by Jory and his weird shape-changing power. Once the vorger were gone they regrouped, relieved to have weathered the ordeal so well.

"Good to see you," Jason said, clapping Neil on the shoulder as Jory greeted Sophie warmly.

"We should find a quiet place to spend the night that isn't here," Jason said.

"We need to be careful," Neil said. "Those people are still around somewhere."

"I think we might have passed one who didn't run fast enough," Sophie said. "There was a big blob of flesh back there that I think used to be a person."

"He got killed?" Neil asked.

"The vorger do not kill," Shade said, his shadowy figure suddenly standing next to them. "They alter."

They all turned in the direction from which Jason and Sophie had come. Shambling towards them was a flesh monstrosity, a four-legged, asymmetrical mound that as much undulated forward as walked.

"Wexler," Jason said, looking at the creature. "Am I imagining things, or is that thing a lot bigger than when we ran past it?"

Chapter 164: A Worse Plan

Clive's team were making their way up through a building that became more precarious as they went. It was the tallest building they had encountered in the city, almost as tall as the archway towers on which they had arrived. This section of the city was more akin to forest than jungle, with the remnant buildings in the shadow of towering trees.

The building they were climbing up through stood higher than the trees around it. It held its structural integrity despite one especially tall tree growing right up through the building itself. The building appeared to be some kind of elaborate palace. The expensive construction gave it a sound foundation but every floor they climbed showed increased signs of collapse.

"I'm starting to think the danger outweighs the promise of treasure," Clive said.

"If his Highness says we should check it out, we check it out," Abarca said.

Abarca, Campos and Hildebrand were the team members Valdis had picked out to join them. Valdis had suggested a voting system rather than picking a leader for their makeshift team. The three agreed immediately, as they had with every subsequent idea Valdis had come up with.

Valdis, it turned out, was a prince from the diminutive but influential Kingdom of Mirrors. Small, affluent and geographically blessed, it had neither expanded its borders nor been had its borders encroached upon in more than eight centuries. This was due to the diamond-ranker known as the Mirror King, who founded the kingdom and ruled it through to the present day. Through the centuries, the Mirror King had a series of queens, reportedly doting on each, even as they grew old and died beside him. Valdis was one of the current queen consort's sons.

Valdis was convinced there must be some great treasure at the top of the towering edifice and the other three agreed on principle. Clive had known there was no point arguing with Valdis' three yes-men but was compelled to ask what made Valdis so confident.

"No one tells the story of the thing they found in the safe, sensible place," Valdis told him. "A grand treasure atop a crumbling palace with a mighty tree growing right through it? That's a story that gets you waking up in someone else's bedchamber, Clive my friend."

Valdis threw a friendly arm around Clive's shoulder.

"Stick with me and you'll have yourself a wild time."

“I’m pretty confident that we’ll be having a wild time, regardless,” Clive said. “I’m mostly interested in surviving to tell that story.”

Valdis just laughed and continued on, confidently leading the way. Clive liked Valdis, whose reckless enthusiasm reminded him of Jason. Clive had let himself be dragged by Jason into enough things he ended up enjoying that he wasn’t opposed to Valdis’ idea. That same comparison also compelled him to be the voice of reason.

They navigated the main part of the building, the most intact section, without incident. Then they reached a set of six towers, interconnected at various heights by different walkways. It reminded Clive of the Mercer family home, whose interlocking towers were a signature of the Greenstone skyline.

The towers were not as solid as the building below them, which became all the more evident as they ascended the crumbling stairs inside them. They started with the most intact-looking tower, but internal damage forced them to switch towers via the walkways more than once. The walkways, however, were even sketchier than the towers. Once fully enclosed tunnels, sections of the floor had long given way.

They crossed one at a time, Clive trying to convince himself he was imagining the feeling of the bricks shifting under every step. Valdis lightly pranced through, using a light-step power usually used for water-walking that reduced the pressure he placed with each footstep. Clive was not so blessed, carefully wending his way past the holes in the floor.

The first two tunnelled walkways were crossed without incident. They reached the third to discover it had mostly entirely collapsed away. The roof was gone, as were most of the walls and a large section in the middle of the floor. The only thing connecting one side to the other across the gap was a mostly intact section of wall.

“This is really not a good idea,” Clive said. “I think we should call it off.”

“We’re almost there,” Valdis said.

Above them was a huge, stone platform, the towers holding it up like the legs of a giant beast. Valdis was still convinced something amazing awaited them at the top. Looking at the missing middle section of the walkway, though, even the other three were becoming wary.

“Surely, there’s a way to get us all across,” Valdis said. “Clive, you’re clever. I bet you can figure something out.”

Clive frowned.

“Yes,” he said reluctantly. He opened his storage space, a circle of runes he reached through to start plucking out items. He took out four pitons, a hammer and two lengths of rope.

“We fasten the ends of these ropes at each end,” Clive explained. “One high, and one low. We run them along the wall where the gap is, edging our way along the low one as we use the wall and the high one for balance.”

“So, you need me to go over and fasten the other end,” Valdis said.

“Yes,” Clive said. “I would like to point out that you’re the only one of us with a slow fall power, so your enthusiasm isn’t tempered like the rest of us.”

“It’ll be fine,” Valdis said, and for most of the crossing, it was. Valdis used a wall run to cross the gap and secured the ropes at the other end, allowing Clive, Abarca and Campos to cross. The final member of the group, Hildebrand, let nerves get the better of him, the rope slipping through his fingers as he fell. Clive rushed to the edge, his gaze moving from Valdis to the falling Hildebrand as he quickly incanted a spell.

“Exchange your fates.”

Hildebrand vanished, his mid-air position now occupied by a startled Valdis. Hildebrand was standing in the spot from which Valdis had been looking over the edge himself. Clive grabbed the disoriented and still screaming Hildebrand before he fell off again.

Abarca and Campos were still yelling at Clive by the time Valdis made his way back up. Without the others, Valdis had made much better time than when they had ascended together, both Abarca and Campos express their relief at his reappearance.

“What’s the issue?” Valdis asked. “You knew I had a slow-fall power. That was some sharp thinking, Clive.”

“I told you this was dangerous,” Clive said.

“And I told you it would be fine,” Valdis said. “Did these guys give you a hard time?”

“It’s doesn’t matter,” Clive said.

“Should I go back and grab the rope?” Valdis asked.

“We have to get back down, remember?”

“Right, yes.”

After the slow and almost disastrous crossing of the walkway, they were able to climb the tower all the way to the top. The stairs emerged through the floor of the massive platform that spanned the towers, which looked to have been cut from a single piece of stone. There were six statues in the middle of the platform, standing in a circle and facing inward. They each had a plinth in front of them with various items, but the group’s attention was drawn to the centre of the circle.

In the middle of the circle was a large creature, a wingless dragon the size of an elephant, with powerful legs and a tail that ended in a wicked stinger. Its scales were

brown and grey, matte to the point that it looked rather like a large rock. The creature had sensed them, languidly getting up from where it had been sunning itself in the middle of the platform. Stretching its limbs, it eyed them hungrily.

“Mountain wyrm,” Valdis said, the usual amusement absent from his voice. “A little one, only bronze rank, probably, but still powerful. It can draw strength from stone to heal and toughen itself. Honestly, I don’t think we can beat it here. The rest of you go back down and I’ll distract it for as long as I can, then jump over the side. Use your escape medallions if you have to.”

Clive and the others had all chosen the path of wisdom, receiving the life-preserving items from Shade. Only Valdis had taken the courage option.

Hildebrand didn’t hesitate at Valdis’ words, bounding back down the stairs. Abarca and Campos followed, after a quick glance at Valdis’ determined gaze, locked on the monster.

“Edge!” Clive yelled, running away from the stairs and towards the side of the platform.

“What?” Valdis asked, looking at Clive in confusion, before grinning in realisation and also running.

“Are you sure that will work?” Valdis called out.

“Probably,” Clive called back.

“Probably?”

“You have a better plan?”

“You heard my plan.”

“That was a worse plan,” Clive yelled. “You go over the side, either way.”

Valdis easily caught up with Clive. Behind him, the wyrm was moving in their direction on powerful legs, but its heavy body moved no more quickly than Clive did and they made it to the edge of the platform well ahead of it. Clive came to a stop, pulling out a silver spirit coin.

Clive knew the bronze-rank monster would likely resist his spell. Consuming a spirit coin to boost his attributes past the monster’s rank to silver would make Clive’s spell more likely to take effect. It presented a dangerous risk-reward proposition, for if his spell failed anyway, he would be left weak and helpless in front of the monster.

Clive shoved the coin in his mouth without hesitation as Valdis leapt off the side of the tower. Clive looked between him and the dragon, casting his spell as he felt the power of the coin surge through him.

“Exchange your fates.”

-
- You have used spell [Juxtaposition] on [Valdis Volaire] and [Lesser Mountain Wyrn].
 - [Lesser Mountain Wyrn] has resisted. [Juxtaposition] does not take effect.
 - Spell cooldown is reset due to spell failure.
-

“Crap.”

He tried again.

“Exchange your fates.”

“Exchange your fates.”

“Oh, come on...”

He could feel the fleeting power of the about to drain away. He looked at Valdis, drifting slowly downward, then back at the draconic monster that was almost upon him.

“Exchange your fates.”

The monster vanished, replaced with Valdis. Valdis ran over and they looked over the side, seeing the monster crash through the tops of the trees below. Clive dropped to his hands and knees at the edge of the platform, panting in exhaustion as he looked over the side.

“Think it’ll kill it?” he asked. “Maybe the trees will cushion its fall.”

“Maybe,” Valdis said. “If it survives, it can heal itself up with the stone on the ground.”

-
- You defeated [Lesser Mountain Wyrn].
-

“No, it’s dead,” Clive said with relief. He had no interest in facing the monster again after they went back down.

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“I should probably go get those three before they try that rope again, then.”

“You go right ahead,” Clive said, rolling onto his back to lay spreadeagled on the platform. “I’m just going to lay here for a bit.”

Valdis eventually returned with the other three who, despite Valdis’ assurances, poked their heads up over the edge of the stairwell warily before coming all the way up. Valdis walked back over to Clive.

“Ready to get back up?” Valdis asked.

“No.”

Valdis laughed, holding out a hand to pull Clive to his feet. Clive groaned as he went to examine the ring of statues. The statues were around twice Clive’s height, each one

depicting a different person. From the equipment carved onto each statue, they were all adventurers. The most interesting part was that each stature had a plinth in front of it, on which rested what looked to be actual versions of some of the gear the statues had. For each statue, there were two pieces of gear, waiting to be claimed.

Each of the five adventurers gravitated to certain gear. Valdis to a sword and scabbard, Clive to a staff and wand. The other sets were an orb and circlet, a cloak and dagger, a sword and shield and a single glove, paired with an amulet.

Clive saw no magic with his perception power but didn't rule out some trap too powerful for his ability to pluck from hiding. He pulled out some tools, examining the plinth carefully, even as the others had already started picking up items. When he was convinced any traps that might be present were beyond his ability to uncover, Clive turned his attention to the staff and the wand.

The staff was carved from a dark coloured wood, engraved with magical symbols. On the end was a bass cap, with a large purple gemstone set into it. The wand was a blue metal rod with intricate lines worked into flowing patterns that ran down its length.

Clive had his own ability to identify magic items which, like most such abilities, worked by giving him a sense of the item's properties when he touched them. Compared to the way Jason's power gave a visible explanation he found it disappointing.

While out of range of Jason, powers like the voice chat and identifying items didn't work. To Clive's delight, however, the party interface power combined with Clive's own identification ability to restore that functionality. Thus, he was happily able to read the properties of the staff.

Item: [Spell Lance of the Magister] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

The staff of an ancient sorcerer, this weapon is focused on priming enemies for a potent magical assault (weapon, staff).

- Requirements: The power to wield magical tools.
- Basic attack: Explosive disruptive-force bolt. Inflicts [Spell Impetus].
- Basic attack: Disruptive-force beam. Consumes mana. Sustaining the beam on a target periodically inflicts [Spell Impetus].
- Effect: Increase the mana consumption when casting a spell to increase the effect. Effect is further increased if wielding both [Spell Lance of the Magister] and [Magister's Tithe].
- [Spell Impetus] (affliction, magic, stacking): All resistances are reduced. When the recipient suffers an offensive spell from someone wielding [Spell Lance of the Magister], all instances of [Spell impetus] are consumed to increase the effect of the spell.

The Magister was a potentially mythical figure, whose actual existence was hotly debated. Many items and abilities were named for him or her, including two of Clive's own abilities. Regardless of the history, finding a growth weapon made the trip to the astral space a success, whatever else he encountered. He took a look at the wand.

Item: [Magister's Tithe] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

The wand of an ancient sorcerer, used to sustain combat effectiveness (weapon, wand).

- Requirements: The power to wield magical tools.
- Basic attack: Disruptive-force bolt. Inflicts [Mana Siphon].
- Basic attack: Mana draining beam. This effect is increased if wielding both [Spell Lance of the Magister] and [Magister's Tithe].
- [Mana Siphon] (affliction, magic): The strength of mana drain effects against the recipient are increased.

Clive stared in awe at the items in his hands. A matched set of legendary growth weapons were so good he would do well to shut up and not tell anyone, so as not to get robbed. He placed them in his inventory and turned to find four people holding out items. Valdis gave him a wry smile.

"You can identify items, right?"

Chapter 165: No One Has That Coming

In the aftermath of the fight with the vorger, Jason and Sophie had no time to catch up with Neil and Jory. The flesh abomination lumbering in their direction posed a new, albeit very slowly approaching, problem. They stood together, watching as it didn't so much walk in their direction as vaguely amble. It was basically a huge, vaguely spherical mound of muscle, skin and fat on four short, blobby legs. Scraps of clothing and pieces of armour could be seen wedged into fatty crevices where layers of flesh and skin had folded on top of themselves.

"Is it attacking us?" Neil asked.

"It will move sluggishly until it is engaged," Shade said. The shadowy entity who governed the trials had chosen to make a reappearance. Also with them was Keane, the adventurer who had been travelling with Neil and Jory.

"So we could just leave?" Neil asked.

"Yes," Shade said. "If you were alone, I would advise you to do so. Your collective capabilities should be sufficient to kill it, however, so I ask that you do. The soul within is trapped in excruciating pain, denied the release of death until its flesh prison is destroyed."

"Is that one of the people that attacked us?" Jory asked.

"It was," Shade said. "He did not flee as swiftly as his companions."

"Forget it, then," Neil said. "He had it coming."

"No one has that coming," Jason said.

"He was trying to kill us."

"And if he'd still been fighting you when we arrived," Jason said, "I'd help you kill him right back. But death is one thing and having your soul trapped in pain for eternity is another."

"I agree," Jory said firmly.

"Sophie, new guy," Jason said. "What do you think?"

"Put him down," Sophie said. "You were right about no one deserving that."

"Am I the new guy?" Keane asked.

"Yeah," Jason said, "but it's three to one already. Your vote doesn't matter any more, sorry."

Jason looked at the hideous blob abomination. It had at least five times the amount of flesh a person would have.

"Shade, do you not have conservation of mass, here?"

“We do,” Shade said. “We also have magic, so the laws of physics are more like strong suggestions. It's best for everyone if you adhere to them, but if you are truly reluctant, there are still modes of recourse.”

“You know about the laws of physics?” Jason asked.

“I have been a familiar many times, across many worlds. I know much.”

“You must be handy to have around,” Jason said. “And you've done a lot of familiaring, you say? I don't suppose you're looking for a new gig?”

“My time here ends when all the trials are passed. Pass the trials, gain the right essence ability and we'll see.”

“Oh, nice,” Jason said. “What kind of awakening stone would that take?”

“All who survive this stage of the trials shall receive an awakening stone available nowhere else,” Shade said.

“Clive will be glad to hear that,” Jason said.

“Doesn't he have his full set of abilities already?” Neil asked.

“Yeah, but you know what he's like. Give him something new and he's a kid at Christmas.”

“What's Christmas?”

“It's a religious holiday that we appropriated to stimulate the economy once a year,” Jason said.

“That thing is getting closer,” Sophie said. “Slowly, but it's getting closer. Shade, can you tell us again about the best way to fight it?”

“A flesh abomination will adapt to how you engage it. If you are fast it will become faster. Strong, and it will become tougher. Hide and its senses will improve. Attack from afar and it will develop ranged attacks. Its weakness is that it cannot be all things at once. If it becomes fast and flexible, it becomes vulnerable to cutting attacks. If it develops a chitinous exterior, it becomes inflexible and slow. I advise you to use Jason Asano's necrotic powers as the main source of damage. Whatever changes it makes, flesh is flesh, and flesh can die.”

Jason surveilled what was about to be their battleground. It was typical of what they had seen in the city; jungle filling the space between overgrown buildings. The broken stone road had soil and roots pushing up through the pavers, along with plants and full-blown trees. The footing was unsure and the terrain complex with plenty of shadows he could use.

“Alright,” he said. “Sophie, you start us off. Get it picking up the pace to chase you around so it's nice and squishy. Then, Neil, you tie it up so I can introduce it to Colin. Sound good?”

“Works for me,” Sophie said.

“If it’s bronze rank, I won’t be able to hold it for longer than a few moments,” Neil said. “You’ll need to get your timing right.”

“Call it and I’ll be ready,” Jason said. “Jory, stick with Neil. New guy, put yourself between Jory, Neil and the bad guy.”

“Not a problem,” Keane said. “I’ve been doing it for days.”

“Everyone knows their job, then. Sophie, will you kick things off?”

Sophie flashed him a grin and dashed in the direction of the abomination. She leapt high into the air, kicking off the top of the misshapen lump of flesh before landing on the other side, hitting the ground at a run.

“Reckless,” Jason said, shaking his head.

“Then why are you grinning?” Neil asked.

“I have a soft spot for poor but flamboyant choices.”

The creature reacted quickly, its body rapidly morphing. It shrank, moving into the shape of a fleshy beetle with six legs and scurrying after Sophie. Growing out of its back were four, long, skinny arms. Lengthier than its entire body, the arms were articulated by multiple joints.

“That is very disturbing,” Jory said. “A giant flesh bug with four arms sticking out of it? I think the worst part is all those extra elbows.”

Sophie led the creature on a merry chase, running away and deflecting the long, grasping hands when they came close enough to grab at her. After its initial transformation, the changes in the creature had slowed but not stopped. As it chased after Sophie, it made incremental changes to its form to help in the pursuit. The body continued to shrink the legs changed shape to better handle Sophie’s speed and rapid shifts in direction. Its arms, which she continued knocking away, went from eerily human hands to long fingers with webbing stretched between them.

“Get ready to go,” Neil told Jason, who nodded.

Neil chanted a spell and the overgrown plant life started sprouting masses of vines, lashing out to wrap around the creature. Its many arms and legs were bound up, along with its long body, completely arresting its movement. Jason emerged from a shadow, slicing the back of his hand with the razor hidden in a wristband for the purpose. From the wound, a pile of Colin spewed out onto the flesh abomination, the leeches immediately digging in with their horrifying rings of teeth.

System messages scrolled before Jason’s eyes in rapid succession, notifying him of the afflictions Team Colin was placing. Most were resisted but Jason’s familiar power was increasing, as was his resistance-penalising aura. He gleefully noted that as many as one

in three afflictions were taking hold, which was better than previous bronze-rank encounters. With sheer numbers of Team Colin, the flesh monster was quickly loaded with afflictions.

Colin only had a few moments to lay in afflictions before the abomination altered its form, undertaking another massive, rapid transformation. Shifting from the horizontal alignment of a hexapod to an upright biped, four of the six legs shrank away while the remaining pair grew bulky and strong. Its body became larger and heavier, the fleshy exterior growing thick, tough skin with protrusions of razor-sharp bone poking through. The four arms grew shorter but more powerful, the webbed hands replaced with savage claws. The result was something like a hairless, four-armed gorilla, covered in elephant skin with bony blades growing out of its body.

The new skin was too much for the leeches to bite through. The blade-bones sliced through many of the vines and it pulled itself free of the rest brute strength. The vines tried to entangle it again but the creature powered free of their grasp, shedding leeches like droplets of water in the process.

During the transformation, Jason was not idle, taking the opportunity to lay in with his spells. They lacked immediate impact and were repeatedly resisted but were quick to cast. By the time the abomination broke free and resumed its angry pursuit of Sophie, Jason had afflicted it with his key powers.

The abomination was now loaded up with ongoing necrotic damage from Colin, plus bleeding and blood poison that would reapply the bleed effect every time it absorbed enough healing to end. This was important as the abomination had altered itself to accelerate healing in an attempt to adapt to Jason's afflictions.

The other pillars holding up Jason's house of affliction were the sin affliction, which increased all necrotic damage suffered and inexorable doom, which added to any affliction in place. The combination of leech necrotoxin and the necrosis-accelerating sin both increasing over time was a multiplicative escalation of the damage, while the bleeding and anticoagulant leech toxin kept the monstrosity's regeneration in check.

The escalating effects of Jason's afflictions had placed the abomination's life on a clock. That left the question of how much damage the abomination could inflict before that clock ran out. In the immediacy, the creature's inevitable demise was not apparent as the abomination thrashed at the leeches still falling off its body.

Jason retreated to the shadows and recalled the leeches, which started disappearing as they contacted the blood on the hand he lowered to receive them. They were quite spread out, however, and could only slowly make their way to his hidden position. The flesh monstrosity lacked the intelligence to follow their direction to Jason's hidden location.

His cloak melded him perfectly into the shadow, hiding him even from whatever senses the flesh monster relied on without eyes or ears.

The abomination furiously stomped on leeches to little avail, as they had been quite scattered by the monster shaking them off. Unable to catch the elusive Sophie, it stopped. Its four arms and the bony protrusions retracted as its body returned to a more blob-like shape, while keeping the thick hide. Welt-like marks started appearing all over its surface, with tiny bone needles shooting out in every direction a moment later.

Keane used his shield to shelter Jory, Neil and himself. Neil had cast his giant's might spell on Keane shortly after Sophie had begun combat and the shield-bearer was twice his normal size, as was the conjured shield in front of him. It was Sophie, Jason and Colin who should have taken the brunt of the attack, but Neil was on the ball, a bubble-like shield snapping up around Sophie. It only lasted a moment but a moment was all she needed to shift behind a tree with her mirage step power. The after-image left behind by her ability didn't seem to fool the abomination's eyeless, earless senses and it didn't keep attacking her.

Jason's hidden position meant Neil couldn't see him to provide another shield, leaving Jason as the only person who didn't avoid the attack. The needles that dug into him were light but they were also a bronze-rank attack. They pierced through his cloak and, in many places, the armour underneath. All Jason had time to do was turn his body away from the attack and shield his face before the needles struck, ducking behind a tree as more of the bone needles poured out of the abomination.

Team Colin took the worst of it, with only a fraction of the leech mass having returned to Jason before the rest were skewered with bone needles. Some, still clinging to the abomination, had been shot off by needles. Most were exposed on the ground and riddled with needles.

Generally, Jason didn't have to worry about the welfare of team Colin. Very few monsters had the kind of area attacks that could pose a danger to the regenerating leech swarm. Jason had only absorbed a fraction of Colin's full mass, which would take a day or two to replenish itself in the safety of Jason's bloodstream.

As the accelerated healing Jason received from Colin was based on how much of the mass was currently residing in his blood, the effect would be significantly reduced until the leech swarm recovered. Fortunately, the healing they offered had grown stronger as Jason's familiar power advanced, so what was a reduced effect now was similar to when he first obtained the ability.

While all the afflictions were locked in and its death was now inevitable, the abomination was, for the moment, still full of life. The necrosis was causing patches of

blackened flesh to ooze blood but the monstrosity did not yet appear impeded. Of its opponents, Jason and Sophie were hidden and what remained of the leeches were dead. That left Keane, Neil and Jory to its attentions and there was no hiding Keane's enlarged body. The abomination morphed again, bulking up and dropping to four powerful legs as a huge, bony spike emerged from the front. It now resembled a rhino whose entire head was a horn and it started charging directly at Keane.

It was building up speed quickly as it charged, but it was no match for Sophie who emerged from her hiding spot and raced ahead of it. Putting herself between the monster and the others, she was suddenly thrown violently sideways as Jason emerged from a nearby shadow, crash-tackling her out of the way, letting the monster pass.

"What are you doing?" Sophie yelled at him as he extricated herself from his rough embrace.

"Your ability can only stop so much, remember?" Jason yelled at her. "Trust your allies."

Sophie glared at him, then down at the arm, remembering the broken mess it had been the last time an attack overwhelmed her defensive power. That had taken even her magic power the better part of a day to heal and the flesh monster's charge would certainly have been more powerful.

Neil, Jory and Keane had been moving and fighting through the city together for several days. With monsters so thick on the ground, that was enough time and enough fights to find each other's combat rhythms. It was an unusual mix, with no dedicated damage dealer, but Neil and Jory both had powerful buffs that could turn Keane into a walking fortress.

Already giant-sized from Neil's spell, Neil gave him another spell, bolster, that would enhance his next active essence ability use. Jory, meanwhile, had a cluster of small, clear orbs floating around him. Materials started floating out of his pockets and belts, floating in front of him. Trace elements mixed with a substance he conjured out of thin air, resulting in a small, red blob that one of the orbs floated over and absorbed. The orb then flew over to Keane, passing straight through his armour and being absorbed directly into his flesh.

Jory had three powers that were the basis for his effectiveness as a field alchemist. The orbs were an ability called eldritch eyes, which could deliver potions across a battlefield, to enemies and allies both. The orbs also allowed him to safely scout at a distance, a valuable support skill for any team.

His telekinetic power, potion mystic, allowed him to alter and combine ingredients without touching them, turning Jory into a walking alchemy workshop. It wasn't an ability

that replaced a real workshop for making proper potions, but for working on the fly it was perfect.

The reason Jory could throw out potions without exhausting his materials was the universal reagent ability. It conjured a versatile potion base he could use to make short-lived potions using only trace elements, letting him save materials compared to regular potion-making. These quick potions rapidly became inert if not used, but took only a fraction of the materials a regular version of the same potion would. This allowed Jory to massively output potions, a key element of both his clinic's financial viability and his sustained effectiveness in the field.

So long as he didn't overuse his material-hungry shape-changing power, he could carry enough materials for numerous encounters. With the versatility of his potions, Jory could be a makeshift healer, buffer, debuffer and even throw around some afflictions using poison and other noxious concoctions.

Between Jory and Neil's buffs, Keane was as ready as he could be for the monstrosity bearing down on them. Just before it hit, Neil's burst shield power bubbled into place around Keane. Keane used a power of his own that absorbed the force of an attack and turned it back on the attacker, which was boosted by Neil's earlier use of the bolster power.

Not even the combination of buffs, Neil's shield power and Keane's enhanced ability were enough to fully withstand the raw force of the bronze-rank abomination's attack. Neil's shield popped as easily as the bubble it looked like, while the shield in Keane's hands warped and shattered, the conjured object dissolving into nothing as it broke apart.

All their efforts in stacking defence were not in vain, however. Keane had leaned into the blow and while he was sent stumbling backwards, he stayed on his feet. The retaliatory force of Neil's burst shield and Keane's damage reflection power had blunted the abomination's terrifying momentum. Attack and defence were both spent and for a brief, oddly still moment, Keane stood looking at the motionless monstrosity.

The moment passed, Keane conjuring a fresh shield as the monster started changing its form once more. Keane backed off, keeping himself between the abomination and the two supporters behind him as Sophie renewed the attack, opening with a wind blade before laying in with attacks. Her unarmed strike powers offered only limited damage but her two special attacks added damage to every strike. The nature of that damage was such that one type or the other would always be effective, regardless of her opponent's protections.

With Sophie once again on the attack, the monster engaged her, shifting thick-legged quadruped with eight arms emerging from every side of its body. The arms were long and

multi-jointed like they had seen before, but this time ended razor-sharp blades of bone. Sophie held her ground, a combination of stubbornness over Jason's earlier intervention and a need to give the others time to reposition.

Bone blades lashed out at her but she dodged or deflected them with arms, legs, even her head. So long as she actively intercepted the attacks, her powers absorbed the damage. The monster might be bronze rank, but it could put only so much power into such rapid, multitudinous attacks.

With Sophie successfully fending it off, the abomination did what it always did, shifting its form to adapt. Its arms changed into tentacles, still sporting blades at the end. It reduced the power of each attack while making them more flexible and hard to predict.

Sophie countered by activating her between the raindrops ability, which enhanced her reflexes for a high mana cost. The result was that rather than defend less effectively, she handled the tentacles with more ease than she had the arms.

The mana consumption of the power was high but several mitigating factors allowed her to keep it up. One was the natural ability of the celestine race that reduced the mana cost of ongoing abilities. Another was Neil, using a replenish spell to restore her mana, and Jory, quick-brewing a mana potion and floated to her in an orb. Her confrontation has allowed them to regroup behind Keane, ready should it turn on them again.

Faced with a continued inability to harm Sophie, the abomination started shifting again, but the effects of Jason's afflictions finally made themselves known. As it tried to change shape again, its skin cracked like a rotten egg, complete with hideous smell. Black fluid spilled out onto the ground, filling the air with the only smell any of them had encountered to rival rainbow smoke for sheer nauseating power. As the monstrosity collapsed, Sophie ran off to throw up, having caught the largest dose.

The abomination flopped wetly on the ground in a pool of its own blacked, runny flesh. It had adapted to the exponentially accelerating necrosis by isolating it, continuing the fight even as it grew inside like a hyper-accelerated cancer until there was nothing left to contain it. The group watched from afar, cloth held over their noses as what was a person, an hour ago, melted into a black, red and purple puddle.

"Thank you," Shade said, once again appearing amongst them. "There are many that suffer so, in this place. I am grateful for any that you can put to rest."

Chapter 166: Part of Being a Team

After defeating the flesh abomination, Jason's temporary team had grown to five. With two defenders in Keane and Sophie, two healers in Neil and Jory, Jason was their only dedicated damage source. They were heavy on sustain but light on immediate damage, with Jason's powers bringing certain, but eventually death to the monsters they encountered.

This setup made for slower going than they might have with someone like Humphrey on hand but it wasn't without benefits. With the oversized monster groups they were encountering, fights were long and everyone's abilities were getting a workout. The results of all that practise were showing each night as at least one member of the group experienced ability advancement.

-
- Ability [Castigate] (Sin) has reached Iron 6 (100%).
 - Ability [Castigate] (Sin) has reached Iron 7 (00%).

 - All [Sin] abilities have reached [Iron 7].
 - Linked attribute [Recovery] has increased from [Iron 6] to [Iron 7].

 - Progress to bronze rank: 35% (2/4 essences complete).
-

The top end of iron rank represented the peak of human potential in a given attribute. Jason's power and recovery attributes had both reached seven, vastly improving his cardiovascular health while making him stronger and tougher than his slight frame would suggest. As his skinny physique transitioned to lean muscle, he felt incredibly empowered.

"If it feels this good to advance through iron rank," he said to the others as they prepared to set off for the morning, "I can't wait for bronze rank."

"Where I come from, you can randomly throw a rock and you'll hit a silver rank," Keane said. "They say you aren't even a real adventurer until bronze."

They had got to know Keane over the last few days. He was a dark-skinned human, from an island city located in this world's Caribbean Sea. He had none of the arrogance they had seen from some of the imported adventurers, just looking to be the most effective member of the group that he could.

They fell into a daily pattern. From early morning to late evening, they would move toward the centre of the city, fighting monsters as they went. At the end of the day, they

would find a promising-looking building, search it for treasures and clear out any monsters lairing inside before setting up camp.

“What do you think this building was?” Jory asked as they regrouped from searching the latest building. “Some kind of huge inn?”

“Brothel,” Neil said absently, then noticed that everyone had turned to look at him.

“What?” he asked.

“That was a very confident response,” Jason said.

“You spend a lot of time in brothels?” Sophie asked.

“Yes,” Neil said with a sigh. “Hang around with Thadwick Mercer long enough and you’ll see the inside of a lot of brothels.”

“He’s seventeen,” Jason said. “How many brothels can he have been to?”

“I think I’ve seen the inside of every bordello in Greenstone,” Neil said. “High class, low class; high class pretending to be low class. He doesn’t care. He’s spent a lot of money at the church of the Healer in the last year or so.”

“At least he’s using paid volunteers,” Jason said. “He gives off a very strong date-rapey vibe.”

They occasionally met more adventurers, but none of those encounters led to further conflict or team-ups. There was some exchanging of supplies, with many adventurers having been separated from the team members carrying most of the team's gear. Jory proved popular in this regard, with his specialised dimensional bag overstuffed with potions.

They also met more vorger and flesh abominations. Building on their previous experience, by the third and fourth encounters they had a good idea of what worked and what didn't.

“We’re lucky they’re both fairly mindless,” Keane said as they discussed tactics one evening. “The most dangerous thing about higher-rank monsters isn’t their more exotic powers, but their intelligence.”

“You’ve seen a few higher-rank monsters?” Neil asked him.

“Yeah,” Keane said. “In areas of high-magic density, we iron rankers aren’t allowed to hunt by ourselves, like you Greenstone people. We get to go along and see some higher-rank monsters in action, though.”

One thing Jason finally got going was practice for his execute ability. Even without burst-damage members on the team, only the toughest iron-rank monsters could actually survive enough damage for it to be effective. It was only against the bronze-rank enemies,

be they the flesh abominations or regular monsters, that he could actually get some use out of it.

The team were strong enough to handle a bronze-rank monster, but while the flesh abominations roamed alone, the actual monsters did not. With the city so saturated in magic, even normally solitary monsters were appearing in packs. In the face of this, the team's usual strategy was to make a fighting retreat, using their two defenders and two healers to keep the group intact while Jason loaded up the enemies with afflictions.

This gave Jason the chance to use the two abilities he had the most trouble practising. They were both direct damage abilities, but neither were effective to just open up with. Both required setting up and were quite similar in their use, which, at least meant that when he could get some use out of one, he could get it from the other as well.

Fighting a trio of monsters, the team was being pressured. Their strong defensive strategy was highly effective against iron-rank monsters, even in large numbers, but bronze-rank beasts with powerful attacks threatened to overwhelm them.

The monsters looked like four-armed gorillas, covered in lizard skin instead of fur. They liked to climb and leap, making rapid attacks with their four arms before leaping away to set up for the next rush attack.

Sophie and Keane intercepted each attack while Neil and Jory supported them with buffs, shields and healing. It was enough to hold on but just barely, the team's mana being rapidly depleted as they used their abilities to the full. If it weren't for Jory delivering mana potions and Neil's replenishing spells, they would have already been exhausted and overrun. Jason was nowhere to be seen, although the patches of black flesh and the blood oozing from the monster's wounds marked his active presence.

"I see what you mean by smart being dangerous," Sophie said to Keane during a lull in the action. "They're starting to coordinate better."

The monsters were starting to attack all at once, or attack in rapid succession with little or no pause for the adventurers to regroup, attempting to break up their formation. They had a strong defensive line and good individual synergies but the raw power of the bronze-rank monsters was beginning to beat them down.

A pair of the monsters started hammering on Keane's shield, which began to buckle until one of the monsters abruptly stumbled away after Jason cast a spell on it from the darkness.

Ability: [Punition] (Doom)

- Spell
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.

- Current rank: Iron 6 (91%).

- Effect (iron): Inflicts necrotic damage for each curse, disease, poison and unholy affliction the target is suffering.

While the bronze-rank monster had inherent damage reduction to Jason's iron-rank spell, that same damage reduction meant that the afflictions it was suffering from had time to multiplying without killing it. The result was that the spell, boosted for each one of those afflictions, ravaged the monster's body, even though the damage reduction. The monster staggered away as dead flesh replaced healthy, passing across the creature like a shadow. Jason finished it off with his execute ability.

Ability: [Verdict] (Doom)

- Conjunction (execute)
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.

- Current rank: Iron 5 (38%)

- Effect (iron): Deals a small amount of transcendent damage. As an execute effect, damage scales exponentially with the enemy's level of injury.

Shimmering light of blue, silver and gold shone down on the monster. Transcendent damage ignored the difference in rank and the creature dissolved directly into rainbow smoke.

-
- You have defeated [Grizzard].

 - [Grizzard] has been wholly annihilated. It has been looted automatically.
 - [Monster Core (Bronze)] has been added to your inventory.
 - 10 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.

The others ignored their share of the loot that fell over them, still caught up in the midst of combat. By the time the fight was over, they were battered, exhausted but grinning in triumph at having overcome such powerful enemies.

“That sparkle power,” Keane said as they sprawled inside a building to hide from more monsters. “You should have been using that from the start with those flesh abominations.”

“You’re right,” Jason said. “Those flesh abominations are hard to time it with, though. It’s an execute power, so they need to be badly hurt for it to have any impact. Normally, you can see the condition a monster is in, but whatever the flesh things do to try and adapt to my afflictions hides their condition. I’m just left guessing.”

“I like this interface power of yours,” Keane said. “I can feel it when my abilities cross a threshold, obviously, but having it show up for me to see gives a real feeling of progress.”

“We appreciate your powers too,” Jory said to Keane. “Standing in front of me and taking all the hits is something I really like in a team member.”

“Being able to take the hits is nice,” Keane said, “but some hits I really wish I could dodge. I envy your ability to get out of the way, Sophie. Or into the way, as you need. I’ve had plenty of times where I’m wasn’t fast enough to be where my team needed me to be. I hope they’re doing alright without me.”

“Huh,” Clive said as a system notice appeared in front of him.

-
- [Jory Tillman] has been added to your party.
 - [Imran Keane] has been added to your party.
-

“What’s up?” Valdis asked.

“It looks like some of my friends have found each other,” Clive said. “And someone new. It’s good to know they’re alright.”

“That’s a useful ability, working from that far away.”

“A lot of its usefulness is lost at this distance. Better than nothing, though. At least it lets me know they’re still alive.”

Valdis nodded. “Far from a given, in this place.”

After their traversal of the towering building, the other three members of their group were more respectful of Clive. He had proven himself multiple times, including identifying the hoard of growth items they had found at the top. Each member of the team had picked out one pair of items for themselves, from the six pairs. The rest of the team agreed that the last set should go to Clive, as the strongest contributor to actually obtaining them. That last pair was the orb and circlet, which weren’t useful to Clive himself but he knew would be very useful to Neil.

After they climbed back down the building, they set off through the city again. Clive glanced back at the building behind them, then at Valdis.

"You remind me of a friend of mine," Clive told him.

"Oh?" Valdis asked.

"He's outgoing, like you. Good at pulling people into his own pace. You both have a dangerous habit, though."

"And what's that?"

"You take risks, ignoring that it may be the people around you that suffer the consequences. My friend, for example, has this indentured servant he had become an adventurer."

"The outworlder," Valdis said. "The one who made that big fuss at the meeting. The indentured servant was that gorgeous celestine?"

"That's them," Clive said.

"I heard about how he had his indentured servant made into an adventurer. That's an unusual choice."

"He was trying to help her because she was a friend of a friend," Clive said. "Then he overestimated his own political acumen and almost handed her off into what amounts to sexual slavery. If you ask him, he'll say he did it because he sympathises with her circumstances. Really, though, I think he feels guilty over what he almost dropped her into."

"I would never do something like that to someone," Valdis said.

"No?" Clive asked. "Climbing up those towers, you didn't face any real risk, but Hildebrand was literally dropped off the building."

"But we got out, safe and sound, with no small reward for our trouble."

"This time," Clive said. "But how many times can you take that kind of risk without it going wrong? And when it does, will you be the one paying the price? My friend has done a lot of good for me. His enthusiasm helped me find the part of myself I'd lost that made me want to be an adventurer. In turn, I need to try and help him avoid making the kind of mistakes that will haunt him. Covering each other's weaknesses and blind spots is part of being a team."

Clive nodded his head at the other three, having their own conversation, further ahead.

"I hope your actual team isn't like them," Clive said. "They have skills, certainly, but you need people who'll tell you when you're wrong."

“I think I do,” Valdis said, frowning. “There aren’t a lot of people in my life who’ll talk to me like this, though. I don’t suppose I can talk you into changing teams?”

“I’m good, thank you,” Clive said. “I’m pretty sure running around with an outworlder will give me plenty of chances to see some interesting things. Especially this outworlder.”

Chapter 167: Making a Spectacle of Himself

“We’re getting closer to the centre,” Jason said, looking at his map. “We could get there today if we went straight for it.”

“That explains why we ran into so many groups, yesterday,” Neil said. “Everyone is converging.”

“Do we go straight for the middle?” Jory asked. His abilities had been growing as fast as anyone else’s, but that had never been his goal. He had gotten more than he could ask for with the alchemy recipe his previous group had come to blows over and was ready to leave. The lesser miracle potion formula would guarantee his clinic’s funding in perpetuity.

“I like the training,” Keane said. “It’s like our own private monster surge, without innocent people getting caught up in it. I like the treasure’s we’ve been finding, too. That said, there are six days left. I vote we make for the middle and decide what to do after seeing what we find there.”

Agreement with Keane’s reasoning was unanimous and they set out directly for the heart of the city. The monsters, unsurprisingly, had no interest in accommodating their accelerated schedule and continued their regular attacks. They didn’t stumble on anything more dangerous than they had previously encountered, however, and kept to their anticipated pace through the morning. They stopped for lunch, all sitting on the edge of a high building eating sandwiches.

“This is a good sandwich,” Keane said. “I’m not sure why you brought food along, though. Spirit coins sustain us just fine and take up a lot less space.”

“Sure,” Jason said, “but of all the time you spend here, will you ever think back on that time you ate a spirit coin while trudging on? Of course not. You’ll remember the crazy fights and the amazing treasure. The dashing affliction specialist with great hair. And now, you can look back on a quiet moment where you stopped to eat with friends and take in this amazing place. If this isn’t what you became an adventurer for, then you’re doing it wrong.”

Keane looked at Jason, looking out at the city laid out before them with a contented smile. Keane turned to take it in himself. With Jason’s words he realised that he had been so caught up from the start that he’d never stopped to appreciate what he was experiencing.

When Keane arrived on the archway tower, he had been startled to be separated from his team. Then he had formed a temporary group, only to have them fragment over

treasure. After that came a new group, more cohesive than the first but also more unusual in their sensibilities. The team leader was prone to nonsensical ramblings, the celestine was somehow his indentured servant and an adventurer. The healer seemed normal enough, but Jory, who Keane had been with the longest, didn't actually seem to like adventuring. That was a distinctly unusual position for an adventurer.

Since then, they had faced fight after fight, coming closer to death than he'd like more than once. In all that time, through losing one team, then a second, only to fight his way through with the strangest of the three, he had never taken the time to really stop and consider where he was and what he was doing. Now he took the time to look out over the city, which was actually quite beautiful with nature having reclaimed the ruins. He glanced at the people sitting with him on the rooftop, eating sandwiches like it was an ordinary day.

"I wish my team were here," he said.

"They are, somewhere," Jory said. "We get to the middle and you'll find each other."

They finished eating and resumed their course through the city. A few hours and a couple of monster packs later, a welcome message popped up in front of Jason.

-
- [Contact \[Niko Tomich\] has entered communication range.](#)
 - [Contact \[Bethany Cavendish\] has entered communication range.](#)
 - [Contact \[Hudson Kettering\] has entered communication range.](#)
-

Jason immediately opened a voice chat.

"Beth," Jason said. "Are you all alright?"

"We are," Beth's voice came back. "Niko and I were dropped on the same tower and we found Hudson along the way. No sign of Emily or Mose, yet. How about you?"

"Missing two as well; Clive and Humphrey. Want to meet up?"

"I do," Beth said. "We're kind of stuck here, anyway. There's a bunch of people all looking for a way to the centre of the city."

"Something's blocking the way?"

"Yeah. Come find us and you can see for yourself."

Jason added them to the party, allowing him to find her with his map ability. Not long thereafter, Jason and his group were arriving at what turned out to be a sizeable camp of adventurers. From the looks of it, some of them had been here for days. The wariness the adventurers had been treating each other with was absent here, with all looking to find a way forward.

The Greenstone adventurers were easy to pick out from the imports, just from their auras. The foreign adventurers had clean, controlled auras. Outside of Jason and Beth's groups, most Greenstone adventurers had shoddy aura control at best.

"What's going on?" Jason asked, after greetings and introductions between his team and Beth's.

"Some kind of plant monster infestation," Beth explained. "Anyone trying to get closer to the city centre than this is faced with tentacles and plant monsters crawling out of the ground. People have tried going around, but the infestation seems to be encircling most of, if not the entire the central region of the city."

"How do you know it's encircling the central area and not covering it entirely?" Jory asked.

"We don't," Beth said. "We're just hoping, because otherwise, how is anyone going to complete these trials. A few groups have tried fighting their way through but we have no idea if they made it or if they're mulch, now. We know from the people who've tried going around that there are a few camps like this one, with people gathered to see if anyone can figure out a way through. Assuming there's a way through at all."

Quest: [Reclaimed by Nature]

Plant life has not just reclaimed this part of the city but actively defends it. Find a way past the aggressive flora to reach the heart of the city.

- Objective: Circumvent aggressive plant life 0/1.
- Reward: Varies by effectiveness of method.
- Some party members are too far away to participate in this quest. They will not receive this quest until they re-enter proximity to party leader.

"What the heck is that?" Beth asked.

"That's Jason's ability," Sophie said. "He gets free stuff for doing what he was going to do anyway. It's basically a scam."

"I can drop you out of the party if you don't want to participate," Jason said.

"I can drop you off a building," Sophie told him.

"I can float down, remember?"

"Not if I knock you out first."

"Look, I love some sexually-charged banter as much the next girl," Beth said, "but we have a bunch of plant monsters to deal with."

While Jason and Sophie looked at Beth with matching expressions of silent affront, Beth turned her attention to Jory.

“You’re an alchemist, right? Plant monsters can often be handled with alchemical solutions, so is there anything you can do.”

“Maybe,” Jory said. “I’ll need to know what we’re dealing with before I can look at solutions.”

“There are a lot of impressive adventurers, here,” Neil said. “I have to imagine someone knows something.”

“There’s a little council, of sorts,” Beth said. “Each team sends one or two people to discuss a way past it. People are trying all sorts of things, so we’ve been meeting every few hours to talk about results.”

“How’s that going?” Jason asked.

“It’s a bunch of adventurers used to getting their own way, so about as well as you’d expect.”

“Jory,” Jason said. “You’re about as close to a plant expert as we’ll get. Beth, can you take us around to people with firsthand knowledge of this thing?”

“I can,” Beth said. “I told you that some groups have tried to make it through. Some didn’t come back, so we don’t know if they made it through. Others tried and came back when things got too rough.”

Jason nodded his thanks, and suggested the rest his group to ask around, see what they could find out. While the others roamed the camp, Beth took Jason and Jory to speak to some of the other teams, Jory taking notes on anything they could tell them. After speaking to enough teams that they were just getting the same information over again, they regrouped to take stock.

“What do you think?” Jason asked Jory.

“This is potentially very bad,” Jory said.

“How so?” Beth asked.

“I think what we’re dealing with might not be plant monsters,” Jory said. “I’ve heard of something like what’s been described to us before, and that wasn’t a monster at all. It was a magical plant.”

“You think these plants have taken over this section of city?” Keane asked.

“Not plants,” Jory said. “Plant, singular. One single, massive plant mass, buried underground and sending up parts of itself to find prey.”

“Prey?” Neil asked. “Since when are plants predatory?”

“I’ve heard of predatory plants,” Jason said. “The one on my world are small, though. They lure in bugs, that kind of thing.”

“The one I’m thinking of is bigger,” Jory said. “Much bigger. It takes centuries, but they have been known to grow to the size we’re looking at, here. It thrives underground, slowly expanding. It forms symbiotic relationships with the other plant life in the area, which become like sensory organs for it. Then it starts preying on anything that wanders into its area. Animals quickly learn to avoid it and it goes dormant. It lets the animals come back, waits until the area is teeming, then strikes. Tentacle vines and spawned, semi-independent plant creatures.”

“And you think this is what we’re dealing with?” Jason asked.

“I can’t know that for sure,” Jory said. “It’s what I can think of that fits.”

“You think this whole section of city has a giant plant monster under it? One monster?”

“Not a monster,” Jory said. “We know from the people who fought them that the spawned plant creatures are iron-rank, while the tentacles, which will be appendages of the main body, are bronze rank. No bronze-rank monster spawns that big, or occupying that much space underground.”

“What’s it called?” Jason asked.

“It’s called a blood root vine,” Jory said. “It’s named that because it straddles the line between plant and animal, with its predatory behaviour and blood sap. That was what really gave it away, when people started saying the tentacles bled when cut. The sap of a blood root vine is almost identical to blood and has a number of alchemical uses. Most of the big ones you hear about are from alchemist grow houses that were abandoned and the blood root vine slowly expanded until someone found it again. It’s a story that goes around in alchemy circles but you never actually expect to see it.”

“So, what do we do about it?” Beth asked.

“Assuming I’m right,” Jory said, “the key is the main body. That means an underground root network. From what I hear, when clearing out a blood root vine that’s gotten out of hand, there’s two ways of handling it. One is to dig the whole damn thing up and burn it. That’s logistically infeasible, especially in five days. I have heard, however, of another method. A method we have the good fortune to have on hand.”

Jory turned a pointed look on Jason.

“Me?” Jason asked.

“You,” Jory said. “I can’t guarantee the authenticity of this story, but I have heard of using afflictions to infect the main body and rot the whole thing. You have to get

underground, at the root system itself, though. If you just try it on the tentacles, it will let the tentacles fall off to protect itself.”

“We’ve already tried that,” Beth said. “There’s a few people in camp who can use afflictions, including me. We blasted a chunk out of the ground and poured every affliction we had into the roots. They withered up, but it didn’t spread.”

“Were any of you focused affliction specialists, like Jason, or were they all area abilities like yours?” Jory asked.

“Area, like me,” Beth said. “Not to put you down, Jason, but who afflicts one person when you can affect whole groups.”

“That’s your problem,” Jory said. “We’re talking about a plant spread over an area the size of Old City. The afflictions you fed it were like trying to turn the sea yellow by taking a sneaky wee in it. You need afflictions that grow worse and worse, faster and faster, instead of petering out.”

“Will my afflictions even work on it?” Jason asked. “We’ve seen a few plant monsters since we got here and my abilities have been very inconsistent on them.”

“They should,” Jory said. “As I said, the blood root vine is more akin to animals than other plants.”

“Blood is one thing,” Jason said, “but to get the kind of damage escalation we need, I’ll need my curses. That requires a soul, or at least the motive spirit most monsters have instead of one.”

“I can’t guarantee anything,” Jory said, “but once it reaches a certain size, it even has a dim, animalistic intelligence. Hopefully it’s close enough to an animal that there is something inside it for your curses to hold of.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

“Then we get out and come up with something new,” Beth said. “Unless you have a better plan, we may as well try.”

“The trick will be getting access to the root system,” Jory said. “You said you had someone who can open up a hole in the ground?”

They all turned to Hudson, the large man who served as the front-liner for Beth’s team. He had been staying quiet through the conversation, leaving things like planning to Beth. His earth powers were the most prominent abilities in his power set.

“It’s not me,” he said. “I have the earth essence, but not a hole-digging power.”

“It was another earth user,” Beth said. “We can get her again.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “Beth, talk to this council you mentioned. See if you can’t find us some extra muscle to fight our way in with. Jory and I will try and get more specific about what we can expect when we try this.”

“What about the rest of us?” Keane asked.

“Get some rest,” Jory said. “This thing will be relentless in fighting back against us. You’ll need all the stamina you can muster.”

The group they gathered had twenty six members, including the five from Jason’s group and three from Beth’s. Keane had found a member of his own team in the camp and pulling him into the endeavour, along with that team member’s own temporary group. Aside from that was another earth essence user and a few more people Beth had wrangled into participating.

The region of the city occupied by the plant was more overgrown than other parts of the city. The buildings were mostly rubble, the paved streets long overturned by roots and other plant growth. As they moved into the area, tentacle vines crawled out to the ground to ensnare legs, thorns covered in soporific toxin biting through skin. The team fought back, cutting away vines as healers purged the poison, a task in which Jason participated using his own cleansing power. It was highly effective, although the way Jason consumed the cleansed afflictions did not go unnoticed.

“Did you just say ‘feed me your sins?’” another adventurer asked him.

“There’s a lot of people chanting spells,” Jason said. “You probably misheard.”

A variety of plant creatures came shambling into the attack. Plodding mounds of fibrous matter that whipped at them with tentacle arms, they weren’t very dangerous but they were tough, their numbers swelling as the group struggled to put them down as fast as new one appeared.

“This should be far enough!” Jory yelled after he determined that they should have definitely made their way over the root system.

“Alright!” Beth called out. “Everyone knows what to do. Gather on me!”

The group pulled in tight on Beth as Hudson, beside her, started casting a spell. Shortly after, a stone dome rose up out of the ground in two halves, closing over them. As it sealed them in, crystals embedded in the dome lit up the interior with luminescence.

The other earth user called for more room and the people inside the dome moved up against the walls. The creatures outside were shut out, but tentacles still came up through the ground. Beth designated a team to protect the earth user while she used her spell to

dig. Her spell did not take long and soon gobbets of wet earth were geysering out of the ground and over everyone inside the dome.

“Sorry,” she called out. “I don’t normally do this indoors.”

With the earth user’s spell completed, Jason glanced at Jory, who nodded back. Jason then walked up to the hole, even as more tentacles crawled from the ground to attack the people under the dome. Beth directed the people who had been shielding the earth user to switch their protection to Jason. Looking in the hole was a vertical tunnel from which the wet ground had been excavated. Left behind, scraped but intact by the digging spell, were thick roots, looking like thick green and yellow veins.

“Moment of truth,” he muttered to himself. Loaded up with every buff the whole group could muster, he chanted a spell.

“Bleed for me.”

A crack appeared on the thickest root, blood red sap trickling out. The sap was, as Jory surmised, close enough to blood that Jason’s ability took hold.

➤ Special attack [Haemorrhage] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Blood Root Vine].

“Now the real test.”

He chanted another spell.

“Carry the mark of your transgressions.”

-
- Spell [Castigate] has inflicted [Sin] on [Blood Root Vine].
 - Spell [Castigate] has inflicted [Mark of Sin] on [Blood Root Vine].
 - [Blood Root Vine] have resisted [Mark of Sin].
 - [Mark of Sin] does not take effect.
-

Transcendent damage burned a symbol into the root as the spell took hold. The bronze-rank vine resisted one of the effects, even with all the buffs Jason was under, but it was the one Jason didn’t need. He let out a relieved breath, then remembered he couldn’t afford to relax as a thorny vine wrapped around his leg.

-
- Special attack [Vine Thorn] has inflicted [Subjugating Toxin] on you.
 - You have resisted [Subjugating Toxin].
 - [Subjugating Toxin] does not take effect.
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
-

Before Jason could cut away the vine, one of his protectors had done it for him.

“Need a cleanse?” the man asked.

“All good, thanks,” Jason said, turning his attention back to the hole.

He cast another curse on the vine, which it resisted, then a second and third time before it took hold.

➤ [Inexorable Doom] has inflicted [Inexorable Doom] on [Blood Root Vine].

Jason held a hand out, slicing it with his wrist razor. Leeches went spilling down into the hole.

“Sorry to drop you in a hole, Colin. See if you can’t suck some blood out of that vine.”

At another of the adventurer camps around the aggressive plant zone, Clive and Valdis watched a heavily injured group retreat from the danger zone.

“I think you were right to urge caution, Clive,” Valdis said. “It looks like something has set the vines right off.”

Previously, the tentacles would only emerge from the ground to attack intruders. Now, however, they were erupting from all over the ground, thrashing about wildly.

“I think something is happening to them,” Clive said. “Are you seeing those black patches?”

“I am.”

They watched as the black patches grew larger, some vines even rotting and falling dead to the ground.

In another part of the city, Humphrey and his temporary team were deep into the territory of the aggressive vines. Their intention had been to fight their way through, but the deeper they went, the more plant monsters and tentacles appeared to meet them. They were a powerful group but they were slowly being overwhelmed.

“Do we keep pushing forward, or go back?” Carly called out, panic tinging her voice.

“Forward,” Lowell called back. “There has to be an end to it. We could be almost clear.”

“There’s no guarantee of that,” Humphrey countered. “We go back.”

“We can’t make it back,” Lowell objected. “We have to risk it.”

“No, we don’t” Humphrey held firm, not pausing as he hacked away at the tentacles. “Our chances may be slight but at least we know there is one, going back.”

The tentacles started growing more and more numerous but flailed wildly, rather than grab at the adventurers as they had done previously.

“What’s happening?” Carly asked.

“Something’s rotting the tentacles,” Lowell said, and as he said, pointing to where the tentacles were turning black from the base. Some rotted away and dropped dead, even as more emerged from the ground. Then a silver, blue and gold light lit up all the tentacles, dissolving them to nothing. As it did, the plant monsters became inert collections of plant matter.

“Was that transcendent damage?” Carly asked.

“It was,” Humphrey said.

They looked around, seeing that whatever had destroyed the plants around them had affected everything within sight. Hurt and exhausted, they dropped to the ground to rest.

“What do you think did that?” Carly asked.

“Not what; who,” Humphrey said with a smile. “I know who did this.”

“You’re telling us some iron ranker did all this?” Lowell asked.

“I know these powers,” Humphrey said. “They belong to a man who can’t help making a spectacle of himself. Thankfully.”

Chapter 168: Team Change

Only seven groups had managed to breach the centremost region of the city before the blood root vine had been killed. One was made up of people with flight powers. Such abilities were mana intensive at iron-rank, requiring them to chug mana potions as quickly as they could without poisoning themselves and stopping to rest atop every building not reduced to rubble by the plants.

Another was made up of adventurers from a jungle kingdom who had managed to find their entire original team. They had come up as adventurers fighting plant monsters and decided to bet on their abilities and experience to get them through. It was even worse than they expected; a seemingly endless, unrelenting slog until they finally reached ground not bursting with tentacle vines. They were hurt and exhausted, their willpower and supplies both spent. It was a near thing, but their experience, teamwork and mutual trust had seen them through.

Of the five remaining groups to get past the plants, all had found methods to do so when searching buildings around the perimeter of the zone. For some, this was an active search. Having concluded that the plants were a part of the test, they reasoned that the means to pass it had to be somewhere somewhere. For others it was serendipity, stumbling onto a way past the plants while searching for treasure.

Only two of the groups had come through in the original teams they had before entering the astral space. Separated at the start of the trial, like everyone else, they had found each other in one of the camps. One of these teams included Padma, Farrah's former mentee. Filled with determination after finding one another, they had no illusions of fighting their way through and looked for another path. Their intensive searching finally turned up an abandoned alchemy workshop, containing bottles of a liquid that repelled the plants.

However they arrived, each group was elated to have made it past the aggressive plants. Their efforts were difficult and costly but they knew that same difficulty made each team who struggled through more likely to be the ones who snatched the prize. It was largely to their dismay, then, that other teams started reaching the middle en masse, mostly in waves from the three camps. It quickly became evident that one of the camps had found a way to kill off the plants entirely.

Compared to the rest of the city the adventurers had been making their way through, the true centre of the city was much more intact. The buildings were still empty, time and

the wet air corroding away anything not magically sealed. It was also a relatively small area, allowing separated team members to reconnect as the three camps worth of adventurers swarmed in.

All the adventurers ended up in what Jason's map marked as the very centre of the city. There was a vast open space, like a city square, with a circular tower in the middle. This was the one building anyone had seen in the city with no signs of damage whatsoever and was both wide and tall. Every adventurer who attempted to get close to the tower encountered a disorienting magical field which sent them staggering back. This was true approaching from above, one flier getting injured as the field tossed them away through the air. The invigilator, Shade, finally appeared to announce that the tower would open on the final day of the trials, several days hence.

Previous conflicts were largely put aside as the adventurers arrived in the square. People found their original teams, even as they celebrated new bonds, forged in the fires of shared adversity. Not every reunion was happy, as someone started organising the counting of the fallen. Those who had collected remains returned them to their teams, where possible. Some teams had fallen entirely, while others lacked the resources to carry the caskets of their dead.

Others weren't dead but gone, having used their escape medallions to preserve their lives at the cost of further participation in the trials. Shade appeared to inform teams which of their members had escaped to safety. While many of the adventurers were able to reconstitute their teams, others were once again looking for new companions in the face of their original teams being absent or dead. Some, left alone, used their escape medallions to leave the astral space behind.

Humphrey's team staggered into the city, ragged from their narrow escape. If it wasn't for Humphrey hacking through the plants like a maniacal, magically-empowered lumberjack, they wouldn't have survived to see their reprieve as the plant monster died. Heading into the city, afterward, they had collected up the bodies of two separate groups that had died trying the same crossing.

The group, aside from Humphrey, were four of a team of six, having the luck to mostly arrive in the city together. They thanked Humphrey, sober in the knowledge that without him they would have been amongst the fallen. Lowell had lost much of his arrogance on their trek through the city. Humphrey still didn't like him, but they shared the respect of dangers weathered together. The group set out to find their remaining team members in the growing crowd as Humphrey went to find Jason and the others.

Clive, Valdis and the rest of their temporary team arrived in a far better state than Humphrey. After the dangers of the tower, Clive had won the rest of the team over against Valdis' proposal to fight their way through. Clive had proposed seeking out alternate means forward but the plant zone had cleared before they had the chance. They had an easy time passing through the rubble of what had previously been the plant-infested region. They were wary of danger, but the surviving jungle was made up of regular plant life. It was even monster free, courtesy of the now-dead carnivorous plant.

Clearing the zone, Clive was glad to hear from his team over voice chat. He announced his intention to go find them, signalling the end of their temporary alliance. Each member of the group was from a different team and had their own people to find, but Abarca, Campos and Hildebrand were reluctant to part from Valdis. Their teaming with the prince was an opportunity they were loathe to relinquish, each seeking to secure promises of meeting up after the trials. Valdis, clearly no stranger to such encounters, saw them each away smoothly. He, in turn, secured a promise of future dealings from Clive.

Jason already had two of his team members, thus waited for Humphrey and Clive to find them. Keane, who now had one of his own team with them, made friendly farewells before they went to find the rest. Jory was about to head off and seek out his own team, who were all fellows from the various crafting associations. Shade promptly appeared to inform him that every other member of his team had used their escape medallions, so Jory remained with Jason.

There was only an hour or so of good light left. There were days left to seek out the city's treasures and everyone took what was left of the day to reorganise. Adventurers reconnected with their teams, collected their dead and sometimes made new teams again. Many teams had members who were dead or, for preference, safely extracted via escape medallion. As when they first arrived, then, temporary teams were built from the scraps of those that remained.

Jason had the fortune to have all his team survive to regroup. As he used his map and the voice chat power to collect his team, he did the same for Beth Cavendish's absent team member. It was the archer, Emily, who had likewise arrived safely in the heart of the city.

Many groups were staking out territory around the square, Jason and Beth's team doing the same while waiting for their disparate members to find them. Groups were rapidly claiming the largely intact buildings that were closest and they picked out a five storey building that turned out to be a square around an open space in the middle. The courtyard inside meant that every floor of the building was splashed with natural light.

As they were taking stock, another group tried to bully them into giving it up, Beth and Jason going outside to meet their challenge. One of the team went pale when Jason responded by manifesting his cloak, rapidly whispering to the others. Jason and Beth shared a querying glance as they watch the group mutter in a huddle. The one who had recognised Jason cloak was using some very aggressive body language.

“What are they saying?” Jason asked quietly. “You have that elf-ears power, right?”

“It’s not an elf ears power!” Beth hissed back at him.

“Yeah, but you have it, right?”

“I can hear them, yes.”

“So, what are they saying?”

“They’re talking about that ridiculous rumour about you killing a bunch of adventurers in a shopping centre.”

“Oh?”

“He’s claiming you killed six people.”

“It was only five,” Jason said. “I bet people think six because there were twelve of them and people just say I killed half.”

“Wait,” Beth asked, turning on Jason. “That actually happened?”

“You didn’t know? Thadwick sent some bottom-feeder thugs to kill me so I wouldn’t reveal his shady land-grab scheme.”

“So you killed them?”

“Some of them,” Jason said defensively. “If you’re fighting twelve guys and they think you aren’t willing to kill them, they aren’t going to back off.”

“You really beat twelve guys?”

“They were all rubbish,” Jason said. “I don’t think any of them even had a full set of powers.”

“You don’t have a full set of powers.”

“Yeah, but they didn’t know that.”

“What does that have to do with…”

Beth trailed off as the other group finished their conversation.

“My friend here thinks you’re some kind of hard man,” one of them challenged Jason.

“Doesn’t really matter what I am,” Jason said. “My friend Humphrey is standing behind you with a sword bigger than you are, so I suggest you jog on, cobber.”

The man turned to find Humphrey standing there, as promised, with his dragon-wing sword slung over one shoulder.

“Yeah well,” the man said as he shuffled off to leave, waving a finger at Jason with transparent bravado. “You should count yourself lucky.”

“Why?” Jason asked. “Are you holding a raffle?”

They watched the group leave, Humphrey dismissing his sword with relief.

“I hate putting it over my shoulder like that,” he said. “It feels like I’m going to tip over the whole time.”

“It was just right,” Jason said. “Casually intimidating, like you might kick the snot out of them as a hobby.”

“You do have very large arms,” Beth said.

“They are quite large, aren’t they?” Jason said. “Do you do any special exercises?”

“We train together,” Humphrey said, giving him a flat look. “You know exactly what exercises I do.”

“So, you’re saying you rub special oil on them when no one’s looking?”

“What?”

Jason dropped his cloak and headed back into the building, calling out loudly.

“Hey Jory! Have you been selling Humphrey special arm oil?”

Three more teams ended up joining Jason and Beth’s in the building they shared. Valdis was his bombastic self, inviting himself and his team in as Clive tried to explain Valdis to the others.

“Imagine Jason, if his father was a diamond rank king,” Clive said as Valdis was already picking out rooms for his people.

“Two of them?” Neil asked. “I’m going up on the roof.”

Neil made himself scarce and Valdis was happily introducing himself, picking each person out from Clive’s descriptions. A celestine woman on Valdis’ team, Sigrid, was quietly apologising for him.

“No worries,” Jason told her. “If Clive says he’s alright, it’s fine.”

“Don’t blame me for this,” Clive said. “I never said it was fine.”

Jason and Sigrid both looked at him.

“Okay, it’s fine,” Clive conceded. “He’s just, you know, a lot. One of you is bad enough.”

“Indentured servant,” Valdis was saying as he greeted Sophie with enthusiasm.

“That’s strange. It’s not rude to say that, right? I mean, it is strange. Look at me, though. It’s not like being a prince with an eight-hundred year-old father is normal.”

“Yeah,” Sophie said, “but one is strange in that people give you everything you could possibly want and the other is strange in that people keep trying to give me to sleazy men.”

“I can see how that’s different,” Valdis said. “Now that you say it, though, I have heard some stories about the prince of Calute and a rather unconventional cattle market...”

“Val,” Sigrid said pointedly, cutting him off.

“Right, yes. Not meant to talk about that. Lovely to meet you though.”

The next group to find them and more politely ask to share accommodation was Keane’s. Keane’s team leader was clearly in two minds, but Keane had been insistent. On discovering the presence of Prince Valdis, Keane’s team became significantly more enthused.

The last team to join was that of Padma. The team from Vitesse had already been in the city when most of the teams arrived and had heard a lot of stories while everyone else was reorganising themselves. Padma was keen to hear more about Farrah from Jason and had convinced her team to ask if they could share the building.

That made for thirty-one adventurers, turning the excessive five-story building into a comfortable fit. With so many people, Jason decided to have an impromptu celebration for reaching the centre of the city and recruited Valdis to get everyone involved. Shortly thereafter, all five groups were on top of the roof, music playing courtesy of a recording crystal from Valdis’ collection.

“I kind of just wanted to sleep,” Beth said.

“I think everyone just wanted to sleep,” Humphrey said.

“So why are we having a party?”

“We were outvoted by Jason and the prince.”

“How do two people outvote twenty nine?”

“I’m not sure,” Humphrey said, “ but I think we may need to keep those two apart.”

Chapter 169: Company Worth Keeping

Since they were the impetus for the rooftop party, Jason and Valdis provided the supplies. Jason set up a buffet, putting out a couple of tables, an array of large bowls full of food, tongs and a stack of plates. He also laid out a good supply of drinks, tapping casks of wine, beer and mead.

"I've only got a dozen mugs," he announced, "so I hope you all have something to drink out of."

Valdis raided the dimensional space of his offsider, Sigrid, from which he retrieved a small sea of cushions so no one was left sitting on the hard, stone roof. He also supplied glow stones as the day's light died and recording crystals full of music. Jason and Valdis stood side by side, looking over the setup with satisfaction.

The thirty adventurers were mingling, all sharing the exhaustion of having traversed the city. Beth's cousin, Mose, approached Jason and Valdis, standing next to them to likewise survey their efforts.

"Not bad for an ancient city in the middle of a sealed-off astral space, right Mose?" Jason asked happily.

"This is what you brought to explore an astral space that was home to an ancient order of assassins?" Mose.

Jason and Valdis shared a nodding glance.

"Yep," Jason said.

"Getting your priorities right is important in the adventuring game," Valdis added.

Of the five teams, Valdis' were the most standoffish, clearly unsure why Valdis was choosing to camp with local teams over more well-known groups. Sigrid took him aside to advocate making connections with the more prominent teams. She knew full well the futility of trying to direct him, but knew that if she started early, then he might actually start to listen sometime in the next few days.

"I'm a prince of the Mirror Kingdom," Valdis told her. "If I want to meet big-name adventurers, I can do that any time."

"Val, it isn't about meeting," Sigrid told him. "It's about making connections."

"Agreed," Valdis told her, laughing again. "Here's the thing, Sig. You make connections when someone's already a big deal and they become someone you know. Make the connection when they're a nobody and they become a friend."

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but you only really know one of these people, right? What makes you think they’re worth making friends with?”

“Call it an instinct,” Valdis said. “I’ve spent enough time with Clive to get a sense of the company he keeps and that it’s company worth keeping. Danielle Geller’s son is here; you can’t complain about that. And that Asano is worth keeping an eye on. Dangerous, that one.”

“Really?” Sigrid asked, casting a sceptical look in Jason’s direction.

“Tell me this, Sig,” Valdis said. “You have two men who carve through people like a butcher with slabs of meat, taking on opponents in job lots and leaving seas of blood behind them. Both have mastered murderous skills that kill quickly and horrifying powers that kill slowly. One of those men spends his days dressed all in black, barely speaking. The sobriety of a killer. The other cleans himself off, has a nice meal with his friends and gets a good night’s sleep. Which of those two men would you keep an eye on?”

“You seem fairly certain about someone you just met.”

“He’s like me, I can feel it,” Valdis said. “The way he watches people. The way he seems to be off-kilter but is actually being controlling. I’m not sure he even realises how much he’s doing it. There’s something dark inside that boy and he doesn’t want it to be who he is. I know that feeling. Ask around and I bet you’ll find he’s dropped bodies that weren’t monsters.”

“I already have,” Sigrid said. “And he has. Should I keep an eye on him?”

“No, just tell the boys to behave. He’s not intimidated by my background.”

“He should be.”

“Be nice, Sig. Outworlders make good friends and terrible enemies.”

Night fell and they activated the glow stones they set up earlier. Thirty-one tired adventurers, stuffed with food and plied with drinks lounged on the cushions in the warm night air. With full bellies and full cups, Valdis’ team had finally loosened up as well.

“Mr Asano,” Valdis, said with exaggerated, drunken pomp.

“Your royal princeness,” Jason greeted back.

“I have heard tell,” Valdis said, “that the rather inconvenient plant monster we encounter was a single, giant entity. I’ve also heard that you are the one that killed it.”

“It wasn’t, strictly speaking, a monster,” Jason said. He had bronze rank booze he could have used to get drunk but didn’t want to risk the hangover.

“As for being the one who killed it,” Jason continued, “I was far from the one behind it. There were twenty-five more people there. If it had just been down to me, we’d all still be in the outer city, scratching our bums.”

“But your abilities were what destroyed it.”

“It was just a lucky confluence of enemy and the specific nature of my abilities,” Jason said. “It could just as easily have been completely immune.”

“I’m more interested in the treasure you got from it,” Emily said. The archer from Beth’s team hadn’t been present to participate, hearing about the shared quest from her team mates. Niko, the smoulder from Beth’s team who had been present laughed.

“You should have seen everyone’s faces,” he said. “One moment we’re fighting for our lives against all these thorny tentacles, and the next, treasure starts falling out of the air. A bunch of items, even essences. I got hit in the head by a whole sack of plant quintessence gems. A sack! It was crazy.”

“People got a bit crabby that we were the only ones who got loot,” Neil said. “Jason ended up sharing out the spirit coins. The ones that everyone saw, anyway. Those of us with dimensional spaces split the extra between just our teams after.”

“Why don’t we do a little showing off?” Beth suggested. “I’ll start.”

She stood up, picking up the dimensional bag next to her and taking out a long robe, holding it in front of her. It was green and brown with a forest motif, hanging like a dress. The colours setting off the pretty elf woman’s tawny skin, chestnut hair and vibrant green eyes.

“Bronze-rank spellcaster robe,” she said with a bright smile. “It enhances plant abilities and poison.”

“Sorry, where did this come from?” asked Lance, the leader of Padma’s team. “A looting power?”

“Neil and I both have looting abilities,” Jason said, cutting off anyone from giving more of his abilities away.

The people who participated in the plant monster raid went around one at a time, revealing their haul from the quest to get past the plant. The results of not just bypassing the plant but eliminating it entirely had made for impressive compensation. There were sets of armour, weaponry and items that affected essence abilities, usually with some kind of plant aspect. Hudson, the earth-essence user from Beth’s team, had received a wrist band that looked like a looped vine and added effects to his earth conjuration powers. Jason had looted a similar-looking vine wrist band that could produce a variety of vine conjurations.

All the magical equipment was bronze rank, like the plant creature, so none of them could use theirs, yet. Instead, they had a jump on useful items for when they ranked-up. Then there were the essences, Jason taking out a pair of green cubes and setting them

down in front of where he sat, cross-legged, on his cushion. They were both green, one ephemeral and swirling, like the cube was full of liquid. The other was appeared more solid, like an opal with a rich green colour as its base underpinned by lush, overlapping shades of darker green.

“Plant and growth essences,” Jason said. “Both fairly common.”

“Wasn’t there a third one?” Beth asked.

“Indeed there was,” Jason said, taking a third cube from his inventory with a flourish and laying it next to the others. It was the blue of an open summer sky, complete with clouds that seemed to float through the cube.

“Vast essence,” Jason said. “This one’s as rare as they come.”

“How much do you want for it?” Valdis said immediately, eagerly leaning forward.

“What do you say, Clive?” Jason asked. “Should we cut him a deal?”

“Gods, no,” Clive said. “Bilk him for everything you can.”

The group broke up into laughter at the exaggerated look of affront Valdis turned on Clive. The loot reveal continued as everyone showed off their hauls from their journey through the city, accompanied by stories of the tribulations faced to get those treasures.

The storytelling culminated with Valdis and Clive retelling their tower ascent and the items they found at the top. Valdis regaled them in the form of an epic saga, Clive drawing laughs as he periodically interjected with more grounded descriptions. Finally their story reaches the incredible find of growth items at the base of the buildings statues, Valdis pointing out to Clive that it was exactly the kind of haul he had told them would be there.

They ended the story with a presentation to an incredulous Neil of the last pair of items. The first was a fist-sized orb and the other a circlet of gold with a blue gem set into the forehead. With Jason’s ability, Neil could immediately see their effects. He started by looking over the orb.

Item: [Sentinel’s Orb] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

On object with the power to refine barrier energy to its most perfect form (tool, orb).

- Effect: Increase the effect of shield-based essence abilities.
- Effect: Cooldown of shield-based essence abilities is reduced.
- Effect: If wielding both [Sentinel’s Orb] and [Sentinel’s Crown], your shield abilities bestow a heal-over-time effect.

“Well that’s just ridiculous,” he said, then looked at the circlet.

Item: [Sentinel's Crown] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

The headpiece of the king of guardians (accessory, circlet).

- Effect: Mana recovery is increased. Mana recovery rate is increased briefly after using a shield-based essence ability.
- Effect: Mana cost of shield-based essence abilities is reduced.
- Effect: If wielding both [Sentinel's Orb] and [Sentinel's Crown], your shield abilities bestow a mana-over-time effect.

"And so is that," he said, looking up at Clive. "You can't just give me these."

"Of course I can," Clive said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "You're on our team."

Neil looked around at his other team members. Humphrey nodded encouragingly. Jason had the usual, self-satisfied grin that gave Neil a near-constant urge to punch him in the face. Sophie simply shrugged.

"Thank you," Neil said to Clive. "Really, thank you."

"Pay us back by keeping us alive," Clive said.

"And you'll need to buy some new clothes," Jason said. "A gold headband with a honking great gem in the middle is a bold look. You're going to have to dress around it."

The next day saw adventurers washing through the city centre like a flood. The more intact nature of the buildings would seem to indicate more remnant treasure but a day of teams turning up nothing more than a few essences and awakening stones between them proved otherwise. The teams in Jason's building did not participate in the day's searching, in no small part due to hangovers. Valdis had been eager to participate but his team was loyal rather than obedient and collectively told him to shove off before crawling back into their camp bedding.

Those who had weathered the night's festivities better were still exhausted from days of every moment not spent fighting still being in full combat readiness. They were happy to join the hungover in staying inside their bedrolls until the sun was high in the sky. In the late morning there was group meditation session on the roof, Valdis leading a dozen adventurers through a sword-dance meditation, much like the one Rufus had taught Jason. Given the athletic attractiveness of adventurers in general, Jason felt like he'd somehow joined a group of models doing tai chi in the park.

The adventurers that had scoured the central city shared the fruitlessness of their search as they mingled in the tower square in the evening. Most teams would be searching further afield the following day, returning to the outer city where treasure hunting that had proven more rewarding.

Jason and Beth's teams elected to stay put, waving off Keane, Padma and Valdis' teams in their "quest for epic loot." Rather than risk something else happening, Jason and Beth's groups chose to spend their time recovering their best form before the final trials unlocked.

Beth, Humphrey, Jason, Clive and Neil were spending a languid afternoon in the shade of their building's top level. They were sat by a window on some cushions Valdis had left behind after the party. The side of the building was open as if there was a missing bay window, allowing them to look out at the central tower within which the final challenges of the trials were located. From the roof above, they could hear Sophie practising with the rest of Beth's team.

"Why do you think all the rest of the trials only become available on the last day?" Beth pondered.

"Clearly, the city itself is the core component of the trial," Humphrey said. "I assume the tower has more direct, specific tests. Shade did tell us at the start that the purpose of the trials was to test for five virtues. Choosing whether or not to take the items he offered was the first trial and reaching the tower was the second. Presumably there are three trials remaining, inside the tower."

"I'm curious about the next one," Neil said. "The trial for those who chose courage is meant to be easier, now. I didn't use the items Shade gave me. It makes me wish I hadn't taken them."

"I don't know about that," Jason said. "We all took bold steps to make it this far. Would we have, if we didn't have some live-saving protections? Even with them, people died. I'm not sure I would have been willing to take the risks I took without them."

"Did any of you choose the courage path?" Clive asked. "I know Valdis did."

The others all shook their head.

As the sun set, Shade appeared before them.

"Greeting, adventurers. I am appearing before you all to announce that the second trial is coming to an end in one day. Anyone present in the tower square at the centre of the city when the sun goes down tomorrow will pass. Those who have not reached it at that time may leave by escape medallion. Those who do not have the medallions will be provided with them. They must be used before the trials completely close, however, or you

will be trapped inside. As a final note, the reward for the second trial will be granted tomorrow as the second trial concludes.”

“One more day,” Humphrey said. “It was good to relax and recover, but should we join the treasure hunting tomorrow?”

“Bad idea,” Sophie said, coming down some nearby stairs. She was covered in sweat and poured herself a glass of juice from the refreshments Jason had set out.

“It’s not just the last day for treasure,” she continued after a hearty swig. “It’s also the last day to quietly remove the competition. Either way, there’s a good chance we’d have to kill some people before they killed us if we went out there. I think I’d rather stay here.”

“Perhaps we could socialise with the other adventurer groups who stayed behind, like us,” Humphrey said. “Most of my family’s teams occupied a couple of buildings not far from here and some of the other foreign adventurers were nearby.”

“Not the worst idea,” Beth said. “I’m curious about this trial reward, though. What do you think?”

“Specialty equipment, maybe?” Clive postulated. “This place was originally a training ground for assassin trainees, right? It would make sense that they would receive some kind of reward for joining the order, like a uniform or something.”

“Would secret assassins have uniforms?” Neil asked.

“Probably not, now you say it,” Clive conceded.

“Awakening stones,” Jason said. “I’m certain Emir knows more than he told us and he implied to me more than once that there would be a chance at some unusual awakening stones.”

“That makes sense,” Clive said, sitting up enthusiastically. “The great astral beings can’t make essences the way that gods can, but they can produce their own awakening stones.”

“I have no interest in divine essences and awakening stones,” Jason said. “The idea of some god repossessing my magic powers doesn’t appeal.”

“No, that’s the interesting thing,” Clive said. “The stones the astral beings produce aren’t divine stones that the astral beings can revoke. They’re just ordinary awakening stones whose aspect aligns with the great astral being in question. I’ve used some of them myself, although the Celestial Book is a lot more approachable than the Reaper. The question is, what kind of powers would a higher-dimensional death entity grant?”

“Powers like Jason’s I’d have to imagine,” Neil said.

“I guess we’ll just have to wait and see,” Jason said. “I don’t imagine we’ll be using them until the trials are over, though.”

“That would be the sensible approach,” Clive agreed. “People are going to get impatient to find out what they do, though.”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “I’m willing to bet there are a bunch of people who’ll be annoyed at how long it takes to reveal what the awakening stones we’ve found here do.”

Chapter 170: He Who Fights With Monsters

In the heart of the city, a crowd of adventurers were gathered in the tower square as the sun dipped below the horizon. Clumped into teams, they formed a ring around the grand tower in the centre of the square. While the plain brickwork of the tower was uninspiring, its sheer height and width left it looming over everything else in the central city.

Jason's party was now reformed, with the addition of Jory, whose own group had already escaped the trials. The teams of Keane, Valdis, Padma and Beth were all gathered around them, waiting with everyone else for the next stage of the trials.

Quest: [The Second Trial]

- Objective complete: Reach the centre of the City of Fallen Echoes 1/1.
- Quest complete.
- 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have
- [Ritualist's Umbrella] has been added to your inventory.

The other members of Jason's team also received items. Humphrey and Clive both had personal storage spaces for them to appear in, while Sophie, Neil and Jory's rewards dropped out of the air. They started comparing items.

"Mine is a belt that accumulates power as I move," Sophie said, already slipping it around her waist. "I can unleash the gathered power as one attack."

"I got a wand that conjures and throws metal needles," Jory said.

"Can you use wands?" Neil asked.

"Yes, I have the same power to use items that Clive has," Jory said. "But I'm not high up in the Magic Society, so I can't requisition magic vehicles whenever I like to go swanning about the delta."

Clive gave the back of his head an embarrassed scratch.

"If you all got such good stuff, why did I get an umbrella?" Jason asked.

"An umbrella?" Humphrey asked.

"Yeah," Jason said, pulling it out of his inventory. It did look high-quality, with a shaft and tines of a pale blue, lightweight metal. The cloth was thick and a much darker blue than the shaft. When Jason opened the umbrella, he discovered a magical diagram drawn onto it in silver.

Item: [Ritualist's Umbrella] (iron rank, epic)

An device made to improve the convenience of using the rituals in the field (tool, umbrella).

- Effect: When open will float in the air and follow the person who opened it.
- Effect: Repels liquid while opened, while extracting breathable air from surrounding liquids. Can be used for underwater travel, but provides no means of propulsion.
- Effect: Harmonises nearby ambient magic while opened, sufficiently to make iron and bronze-rank rituals easier to enact. The use of nearby magic can disrupt this effect.

"I take it back," Jason said. "This thing is awesome."

"We might want to deal with this later," Neil said. "We're drawing a little bit of attention."

As Neil said, the nearby adventurers were all looking in their direction.

"Good looking out, Neil," Jason said as he put the umbrella away.

Not long after, the attention of the adventurers was diverted from Jason's group to their actual purpose in being there as Shade appeared. Not just one of him, but one for each adventure team present

"Congratulations," the Shades said. They spoke quietly but their voices carried through the square, eerily layering the words. "You have survived the second trial and the time has come for rewards."

The Shades handed out black awakening stones, one for each adventurer. There was almost no sensation of pressure from it in their hands, as if it wasn't really there. The black of the stone wasn't as much a colour as an absence, the same light-devouring darkness Jason's cloak could achieve.

Item: [Awakening Stone of the Reaper] (unranked, legendary)

An awakening stone sharing affinity with the Reaper. (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
- Effect: Awakens an essence ability.
- You have 3 unawakened essence abilities.

"Highest rarity," Clive said with excitement. "That means the list of abilities it could awaken is much smaller than normal, usually restricted to just one or two types."

Jason and Clive were not the only adventurers with the power to identify items and a susurrus moved over the crowd as word spread that they had all received a legendary awakening stone.

“You seem excited for someone who can’t actually use his,” Neil said to Clive.

“Clive’s more interested in new knowledge than new power,” Jason.

“Exactly,” Clive said. “Do you know how rare this opportunity is? Information about the rarest essences and awakening stones is incredibly limited because only so many people ever get to use them, and those people might have no interest in helping the Magic Society fill out their records. But look at how many people we have here! We’ll get so much information on who got what power, across different races and essences. This is going to be great.”

“What will you do with your stone, then?” Humphrey asked.

“Until we have better records,” Clive said, “I can only assume that an awakening stone of the Reaper will best fit Jason.”

Clive lightly tossed his stone to Jason.

“Thanks, Clive,” Jason said brightly.

“Well, I know you’ve been holding off on new awakening stones for a while,” Clive said. “Also, an extra sample of what an outworlder gets from it would be very appreciated.”

“Now your motivations become clear,” Jason said. “I suppose next you’ll be asking for chunks of flesh, to compare outworlder flesh with regular peoples.”

“That’s not a bad idea, now you say it,” Clive said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “Something out of the torso would be best, maybe slice a bit off the internal organs.”

“Not a chance,” Jason said.

“We could heal you right back up,” Clive said. “Right, Neil?”

“As long as I get to watch you cut the bits off, I’m willing to participate.”

“I said no.”

“We could put you into a magical sleep,” Clive said.

“You so much as try it and I’ll do you to the Adventure Society for necromancy.”

“I’m in the same position of having awakened all my abilities,” Jory said, pulling the conversation back on track. “I think I’ll give my stone to Belinda, since she’s going to be getting her own essences, soon.”

“Thank you,” Sophie said.

“The next trial,” the Shades said arresting everyone’s attention, “will test wisdom or courage. For those who chose the path courage in the beginning, your boldness shall be rewarded now. The test of wisdom is now before you and you may take it without fear.

Should your judgement be insufficient to the task, there is no danger in failure. You shall simply be led from the trial grounds in full safety.”

The tower the adventurers were surrounding was blank brickwork, but with a loud grinding of stone, that began to change. Bricks pushed out from the walls or retreated back, forming a series of rectangular doorways. Every second doorway opened, retracting slowly up into the ceiling to reveal dark passages beyond. The others remained closed, the brickwork marking their positions.

“Those who selected courage,” the Shades said, “choose a door and step through. Each must face their trial individually and you must each choose a door for yourself, and yourself alone.”

“Is it just me, or does the weird voice thing make it all the more portentous?” Jason asked. “Don’t get me wrong, the ancient tower of trials in a ruined interdimensional city has portent enough to be going on with, but it really seems to cap it off.”

“Is he always like this?” Sigrid asked.

“Pretty much,” Humphrey told her.

Sigrid looked from Jason to Valdis, letting out a light shudder.

Shade’s words had brought up a buzz from the adventurers who, having just reunited their teams, were required to split up again. It was not long before the first person stepped forward to accept the challenge. Predictably enough, it was Valdis, with others quickly following. They only made up a fraction of the gathered adventurers, with only one in five or six having chosen the path of courage from the start.

The adventurers picked their doors and passed through, the stone sliding slowly back down behind them. In one case, however, the door slammed back down, not behind the adventurer but on top of him, easily crushing him to death.

“The test of wisdom is for those who have already chosen courage,” the Shades announced. “Those unwilling to take the test of courage will be allowed to leave in safety. Those who seek to move forward without proving their courage will see that choice also demonstrates a failure of wisdom.”

A number of other adventurers moving forward scurried back to the main group.

When the last of the adventurers to move had chosen a door or returned to the group, the remaining doors closed and the alternate doors opened.

“The trial of courage is not for the uncertain,” Shade warned. “You will each encounter an entity known as a nightmare hag. These are diamond-rank entities from the astral that have no physical existence in this place and cannot harm you directly. What

they can do is warp the reality around you, manifesting that which you fear most. If you are unable to face this fear, it will most certainly kill you.”

Short lines of dark energy appeared on the ground, all around the tower. Rising up from the lines were a series of archways, each made from a single piece of glossy obsidian. The dark lines from which they emerged rose up to fill the archways with consuming darkness, making each archway identical to the ones that first brought the adventurers into the city.

“These shadow gates will return you to the archway towers,” the Shades announced. “If you do not wish to face the next trial, these gates will return you to the archway towers. You may then use the tower gates to leave the city. If you so wish, you may take this final day to further explore the city, but know that if you remain here when the sun sets tomorrow, then here you will stay.”

“I’m out,” Neil said as soon as Shade stopped talking. “I’m not foolish enough to think I can beat out all these other adventurers and I’m not going to die trying. Also, getting killed by your own fears is literally the worst way to die I can imagine.”

“Me too,” Jory said. “Between the recipe I found and enough plant quintessence to fill a wheelbarrow, I’ve gotten everything I could want and more from this place.”

“I’m not going either,” Sophie said. “I’ve managed to avoid some unpleasant fates over the last year and I have no interest in some magic ghost lady throwing me into everything I fought so hard to escape.”

“That’s fair,” Jason said. “Just you and me, Humphrey?”

“Yes,” Humphrey said. “My family has sheltered me from a lot. I’ve never been confronted with the kinds of challenges you faced, Sophie. If I’m going to be a good adventurer, I need to face up to my fears, whatever form they take.”

Quest: [The Third Trial]

The trial of courage will put you face to face with your greatest fear. Resolve will see you through, while a lack of will shall see you dead.

- **Objective:** Successfully confront your greatest fear.
- **Reward:** Random magic item.

“I know what my greatest fear is already,” Jason said. “It isn’t a threat to me.”

“That suggests it isn’t actually your greatest fear,” Neil said.

“No,” Jason said, “it is. See you all on the other side.”

With that, he marched off for the open doors. Humphrey nodded a farewell and did the same. Along with many other adventurers, they each picked a doorway and walked through. The doors closed behind them with finality.

Humphrey regained consciousness sprawled in soft earth. His head rung and his body ached. The air was full of noise and thick with the taste of blood. Shrieks of fear and pain were punctuated by the screeches and roars of monsters.

He scrambled to his feet, casting his gaze around. He didn't know where he was at first, then realised he hadn't recognised his home because it was half-collapsed and on fire. He was outside the main building, surrounded by the corpses of people he recognised. Some were burned, others savaged by monsters, all laying dead where they fell.

He could see a half-dozen monsters just from where he stood, and heard many more beyond. He started moving, calling his sword into his hands. He began a slaughter, one monster after the other but there was no end to them. As he fought his way through the grounds he found only the monsters and the dead. His team, his friends, his family. Finally he found his mother, clinging to the last vestiges of life.

"You were supposed to be the best of us!" she accused with a ragged dying breathe. "You weren't strong enough! You failed us..."

As he watched her die, monsters were charging in on him. Instead of fighting, he let his sword drop from his hands, casting his gaze around at the monsters lunging at him.

"No," he said flatly, his face stony and eyes sharp. "I won't let this happen. I will be strong enough."

The world around him shimmered like a mirage and vanished, leaving him in the dark. He took out a glow stone, revealing his location as a circular room made from the same brickwork as the tower. Shade was standing nearby, as was a cage with silver bars etched with gold runes. Inside was a figure that looked a lot like Jason in his shadow cloak, although this creature's cloak of darkness seemed ragged and torn. There were two ways out of the room, both stairwells alcoved into the walls. One led up, the other down.

"Congratulations on passing the third trial," Shade told him.

Jason followed the stairs up into a dark, circular, empty room. There was another stairwell, alcoved like the one he stepped out of. Down the stairs and into the room came a person, Jason himself, but different. His features were more handsome, with a greater resemblance to his brother. His combat robes were more elaborate and in shades of dark

purple and gold, instead of grey. At his hip was a sword, matching the one on Jason's own. On his head was a simple crown of dark gold.

The two Jason's moved closer, sizing each other up.

"My humble beginnings," the other Jason said. "Fancy meeting me here. But you knew you would, just like you know that one day, you'll be me."

"You aren't inevitable."

"Aren't I? Maybe if you gave it all away and led a quiet life, but we both know you won't. You've got that hero complex. That need to feel important."

Other Jason laughed.

"You can't hide it from me," he continued. "You'll follow this life and you know you'll have to make the hard choices. You'll keep making them because deep down, you like them. You like how important it makes you that you're the one in the middle of everything. And sooner or later, that leads you to me. What's the saying? He who fights with monsters should look to it that he does not become a monster?"

"Don't pretend you've read Nietzsche," Jason told his double. "You got that from a video game."

"I'm you from the future," the double said. "I've done all kinds of things you haven't."

"But you haven't read Nietzsche," Jason said. "Turning evil didn't change me that much."

The double laughed. "Fair enough. But I'm not evil, you know. I've just lost my illusions."

"There's nothing wrong with illusions. Justice is an illusion. Civilisation, morality. They're illusions we all agree to share because they make us better."

"Do they really? You think people won't disappoint you? They always fall short. I have the power to fix that and you will too."

"Is that what the crown's about? You're some kind of tin-pot dictator?"

"Something like that," Other Jason said. "Democracy is a pack of gullible idiots being exploited by the selfish and immoral. When you have the power to take control, you can fix things."

"Can I?" Jason asked. "You were right about people always falling short and that includes us. I've fallen short plenty, but you've clearly fallen all the way down."

"So you think now. How many bad days are you from becoming me?"

"That's from Batman," Jason said. "Not even good Batman."

"You don't like The Killing Joke? I forgot what a social justice wanker I used to be."

"Alright, we're done," Jason said, "I'm definitely not turning into you."

“Are you sure?” Other Jason asked, moving closer with a sinister grin. He stopped as they each realised the duplicate was taller, then Other Jason gave off a smirk.

“Looks like I’m better than original recipe in every way. Do you want to measure...”

“Don’t even,” Jason said. “You know Kaito’s still taller than us.”

“Oh, I dealt with our dear, older brother. The man married the love of our life.”

“How are you not over that when I am? Also, if you break up when you’re nineteen, it wasn’t the love of your life. It was the love of your adolescence.”

“You keep telling yourself that because you’re too weak to do anything about it,” Other Jason said. “You’ll get stronger, never fear.”

“Really? Never fear, during a fear trial? Evil me has some weak jokes.”

“Hey, I’m just a physical manifestation of your fears,” Other Jason said. “Anything I do is on you.”

“Aren’t you meant to be menacing me?”

“Would it work?”

“No. It’s good that I seem to have gotten over that chuuni phase.”

“Yeah, it got pretty bad there,” Other Jason conceded.

“If you’re the future me, did I ever get home?”

“I’m not actually from the future,” Other Jason said.

“Right. You’re a manifestation of my potential future self.”

A third figure shimmered into place. It was a figure made of darkness in a ragged cloak.

“Kill him!” it hissed at the duplicate Jason.

“Ooh, Mum’s not happy,” Other Jason said.

“That’s the.. what was it called?” Jason asked.

“Nightmare hag. Yeah, that’s her. She doesn’t really have control of what she conjures up and she’s not very bright. Why would I kill you before you’ve had the chance to turn into me. That’s like your fears vanquishing themselves.”

“KILL HIM!” the hag hissed again, the sound filling the chamber. The duplicate’s hand twitched in the direction of the sword at his hip, his face twisted with sudden fury. His hand finished the movement to the sword, which he drew, turning a furious gaze on the hag.

“NO ONE TELLS ME WHAT TO DO!” he roared, lashing out with the sword. It slashed through the ephemeral hag and both she and the duplicate vanished. In their place were shade and an empty cage.

Quest: [The Third Trial]

- Objective complete: Successfully confront your greatest fear 1/1.
 - Quest complete.
 - 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have
 - [True Light] has been added to your inventory.
-

“Congratulations on passing the third trial,” Shade said as Jason took out his new item to examine. It was a fist-sized lump of golden crystal.

Item: [True Light] (diamond rank, rare)

True light of the sun, trapped in a single moment (consumable, crystallised light).

- Effect: Consume to release the true light of the Sun.
-

Jason raised an eyebrow at the rank of the items, although he wasn't sure how useful it would be. Maybe it produced some kind of powerful, burning light, but he couldn't use it to tell.

“Was the test meant to go like that?” Jason asked, putting the item away again.

“It is what it is and goes how it goes,” Shade said. “Assassins adapt to their situation.”

“I'm not an assassin.”

“Yet here you are, taking an assassin's trials.”

“That's true. I've been thinking something was off about this whole thing for a while.”

Chapter 171: Irreconcilable Ideals

Shade led Jason upstairs into a square room. The stairs emerged from an alcove in the middle of one wall, with a sealed door on the opposite wall. The walls to either side were covered in square panels marked with what looked like scrambled segments of constellations. On the walls and floor were images of constellations that were whole and in order. Jason was about to enter the room when Shade stopped him.

“Once you enter this room,” Shade warned, “the next trial shall begin.”

Quest: [The Fourth Trial]

The trial of intellect will test whether your mind is not just sharp enough, but calm enough to save you from a grisly fate.

- Objective: Successfully solve the puzzle room.
- Reward: Random magic item.

“The virtue this trial will test is intelligence,” Shade continued. “If you fail to pass this test within the time limit, you will die.”

“Again with the succeed or die?”

“The Order of the Reaper needs those who are not just intelligent, but who can use their intelligence under pressure. An intellect that fails when it matters the most is worthless. Though the Order may be gone, it is their trials that remain and their standards you must reach.”

“So, what’s the time limit?”

“That will become clear once the trial begins. If you wish to withdraw at this point, you may. I will call a gate and allow you to leave. Once you have accepted the trial, however, I will not do so again. The remaining questions, then, become how smart do you think you are, and are you right?”

Jason took a long, calming breath as he looked into the room.

“That’s a tricky question, isn’t it?” Jason said. “People have a tendency to overestimate their own intelligence and I’m sure I’m no different. I mean, I think I’m pretty cluey but do I really believe that deep down?”

“You have the day to complete the final trials,” Shade said as Jason pondered over how much of his self-confidence was warranted. “You have time to consider.”

“No, I’m good,” Jason said, rolling his shoulders as he steeled his resolve. “If I’m going to be the kind of adventurer, the kind of person I want to be, I’m going to face tougher challenges than this.”

Shade stepped aside and Jason went to move forward, then stopped.

“Actually,” he said, “I think I will take the time to stop and consider.”

Shade was an indistinct silhouette, yet Jason somehow got the sense of a wry smile coming from the shadowy invigilator.

“Very well, Jason Asano. When you are ready to begin, step into the room.”

Shade vanished and Jason turned to the room. He started looking over the patterns of constellations on the ceiling and the floor, then comparing it to the walls. From the looks of it, he had to slide the square wall panels to make the correct patterns, based on the complete patterns on the ceiling and floor. He looked over it all, looking for matches and differences, seeing how the patterns matched up.

The pattern on the floor was different to the pattern on the ceiling. His first thought was that the trick was figuring out which wall would match which pattern and then matching them, but as he kept looking, he realised that neither wall had the correct pieces to match the patterns. Having realised it wasn’t about matching the images, Jason looked at the constellations for other kinds of patterns.

Finally, his face cracked a huge grin. The constellations, he realised, were just a disguise. The stars themselves made up a numerical pattern. Looking over the walls to make sure, he spent a goodly amount of time making sure he could make the whole room fit the pattern, then stepped inside.

The moment his foot touched the floor, a stone slab started descending to seal the alcove, locking him in the room. The patterned wall then started rumbling, slowly moving towards one another with a rumbling of stone.

“Wall crush puzzle room! Wait, focus, Jason!”

He rushed to one of the walls and started sliding the panels. They were heavy but slid well, apparently well-lubricated in spite of their centuries of disuse. Having already mapped out the patterns he needed, he worked quickly as the wall pushed slowly towards him. He finished the first wall and after quickly checking over his work, moved to the other.

The walls were closing in slowly but the room was already a third smaller than when he began. Seeing that, he realised that stopping outside the room was a required part of the test. Not only would he be pushed for time if he came in not already knowing what to do, but the enclosing walls were already hiding portions of the ceiling and floor patterns.

He went to work on the second wall, practice allowing him to move faster. He slid the final panel into place with relief but the walls didn't stop moving.

"What?" he asked, looking over the walls in a panic.

"This is right, this is right!" he told the empty room as his eyes skittered across the patterns. "This is wrong!"

He madly started sliding panels while admonishing himself.

"Four comes before five, idiot! You are not getting crushed to death because you don't know how counting works!"

Having corrected the pattern, the walls stopped, the room half its original width. Jason let out a shuddering breath as the walls started retracting.

Quest: [The Fourth Trial]

- Objective complete: Successfully complete the puzzle room 1/1.
- Quest complete.
- 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have
- [Summoner's Die: Form] has been added to your inventory.

Shade appeared next to him.

"Congratulations."

"No worries," Jason said. "The whole wall-squeezing thing was a bit panic-inducing but the puzzle wasn't that hard. More of a third-person, narrative-driven-shooter puzzle than a puzzle-game puzzle. The kind where as soon as you solve it, it turns out the bad guys were following you all along and the room fills with faceless mooks to kill."

Jason looked around, hopefully.

"The last test isn't a bunch of faceless mooks pouring in here, is it?"

"No," Shade said. "Anyone can learn to fight, which is but a facet of what the Order required from its members. You have demonstrated wisdom in accepting the tools to survive, capability in crossing the city, courage in confronting your fear and intellect in solving the puzzle room."

The door at the end of the room slid upwards, revealing another stairwell.

"The final virtue to be tested is resolve," Shade explained. "Members of the Order of the Reaper would be required to operate alone for extended periods. Far from home, often living false lives, it is easy to lose focus on the mission. Only the most resolute were allowed into the Order. Proving their resolve was always the final test of the Order."

"That doesn't sound at all ominous," Jason. "Up the stairs, then?"

“Yes.”

Before moving on, Jason pulled out his new item for a look. It was a clear gemstone cut with twelve facets, with each facet having a different symbol engraved on it. His translation ability told him what the symbols meant, each one the name of a different animal.

Item: [Summoner's Die: Form] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

An eldritch tool for altering the nature of summoned creatures (weapon, wand).

- Requirements: Summoning power.
- Effect: Rolling this die while enacting an iron-rank summoning power will randomly alter the form the summon takes.
- Can be used in conjunction with [Summoner's Die: Element] and [Summoner's Die: power]. Using more than one die of the same kind will negate the effects of all dice.

“Damn,” Jason said, looking over the description. “Growth item, plus it’s a D12. Shame I don’t have a summoning power.”

He put it away and followed Shade through the room and up the stairs into a huge, circular chamber with a high ceiling. It was blank brick, except for the ceiling, where numerous holes, wide enough for a person to fall through, led up and into darkness.

“That’s an impressive ceiling,” Jason said. “I mean, all those holes can’t be great for structural integrity but there aren’t any supporting pillars in a room this big. Architects must have it easy with magic to fall back on.”

“The final test,” Shade said. “As with the first, there is no danger, only a choice. There is no puzzle, only the will to move forward. There is no obstacle; you need only the resolve to do what you must in order to go forward.”

A metal clanking echoed down through the holes in the ceiling, followed by the descent of frosted glass cylinders, suspended from chains that lowered them to the floor. One cylinder came down from each of the dozens of holes, coming to a rest on the floor. There was no light but Jason’s ability to see through darkness allowed him to see clearly. Inside each cylinder was a human-shaped silhouette.

All at once, the cylinders cracked open, a person dropping out of each, deposited alongside a cloud of frosty air. The people were unconscious, bound hand and foot with a power suppression collar around each of their necks. Most were humans, elves or celestines, but there were others scattered through as well; smoulders, runics, leonids and draconians. They were all dressed for combat, although none had weapons.

“What is this?” Jason asked.

“When the Order was testing their initiates, the initiates were forced to fight their own friends and companions to prove they were willing to do whatever the order asked of them. To represent the Order is to subordinate your own principles to what the Order requires of you.”

“Let me guess,” Jason said. “They were actually fighting a projection or some kind of facsimile. Just enough to prove they were willing, without throwing away good initiates.”

“It was as you say,” Shade told him. “When the churches attacked the Order’s final hiding place, they did not take it easily or without cost. These people are some of the prisoners that were taken from the attacking forces and imprisoned in this place. They were placed here as a new test of resolve.”

“You want me to execute these people?”

“Yes. They have been held here for centuries, trapped in a magical state where they do not age, do not think, do not feel and do not die. The companions who left them behind are no doubt mostly dead and gone. Now it is their turn. Show that you have the strength of will to put down the order’s enemies.”

Quest: [The Fifth Trial]

The invigilator of the trials has asked you to execute the Order of the Reaper’s enemies.

- Objective: Show your resolve.
- Reward: Random magic item.

“Not a chance,” Jason said.

“You would show them mercy,” Shade said, “but they had no mercy to show. They did not restrict themselves to slaughtering the Order’s membership. Most of the people living in the final fortress were servants whose only crime was a lifetime of diligence. Their families, their children. These people spared none of them.”

“Which makes them terrible people, assuming you aren’t straight-up lying to me,” Jason said. “I’m not going to execute a bunch of people on your say so.”

Jason moved to the closest person, kneeling down to examine her. She was wearing robes styled for combat like his own, but white with brown flourishes. They were dirty and stained but he could still make out the symbol of the Healer embroidered into them.

“The Healer,” he murmured to himself. That didn’t match the picture that had been painted of intolerant churches striking out in ignorance. “Revisionist history. How shocking.”

She was unconscious, her skin pale, clammy and shivering. Jason put a hand to her face and felt her cheek.

“If this is some kind of projection or double, it’s a pretty damn good one,” he said. “I’m not going to kill these people.”

“They are deserving of death.”

“Says you, who I don’t know that well.”

“It is this, or leave.”

Jason stood up, turning to face Shade.

“Then I choose leave. I’m not killing them, so open up your magic gate because I’m done. Also, I’m taking this lot with me.”

“They are not yours to take.”

“Tough.”

“You think it is your place to decide their fate?”

Jason stepped right up to Shade, face to the spot Shade’s face would have been.

“Mate, you want resolve, then here it is: get to helping, get to stopping me or get out of my bloody way. That’s your choice to make.”

“Very well,” Shade said. “You may take them.”

“Really?” Jason asked. “I was kind of expecting you to kick my arse.”

“The Order never wanted those who would follow directions blindly. The ability to make judgements in the face of inevitably shifting circumstances is one the most important traits of the Order’s membership. The resolve to decide the best course of action and follow it through, even against the Order’s own directions, was always a crucial virtue. The Order wanted thinking, intelligent agents, not blindly obedient soldiers.”

“Wait, you’re saying I passed?”

“Yes.”

Quest: [The Fifth Trial]

- Objective complete: Show your resolve 1/1.
- Quest complete.
- 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have
- [Immortal Crest] has been added to your inventory.

Jason minimised the window, ignoring it for the moment.

“I can take all of these people with me?” he asked Shade.

“All those who survive. You are not the only one to reach the final trial and there are other rooms like this.”

“If refusing to kill them is a pass, you’re going to let people kill them just to fail?”

“Killing them does not mean failure,” Shade said. “This is not a test of the willingness or unwillingness to kill. It is a test of resolve, which can be shown in many ways. The refusal to bend, even if it means giving up what you came for. A determination to perform any act in pursuit of a goal.”

“It is even possible to fail this test?” Jason asked. “I know people tend to only go halfway with things, but I have to imagine anyone who gets this far isn’t what you’d call irresolute.”

“When truly challenged, many falter when they should follow through or compromise themselves when they should hold to their principles.”

“What’s your sample size on that, mate? Didn’t you say this was a new test?”

“Would you like give up the success you have achieved and face a new trial?”

“No thanks, mate; your trials are flawed. Your order and I have irreconcilable ideals and yet here I am. It’s like this whole thing is...”

“What?” Shade asked as Jason trailed off.

“Nothing,” Jason said. “What comes next?”

Shade was silent for a long moment, Jason getting the sense of an assessing gaze from the featureless shadow.

“Next,” Shade said, “is the prize. The legacy of the Order of the Reaper.”

Chapter 172:
Meanwhile, Two Weeks Ago in Greenstone...

Thalia Mercer was ill at ease. Most of the city's iron-rankers had left a few days earlier and would be gone for weeks. She had hoped, in the quiet that settled over Greenstone in their absence, to start getting through to her son. She and her husband both had made so many mistakes with him, which had almost cost them their son. The mysterious cultists and the horrific thing they implanted into Thadwick had brought home just how disastrous things had gotten and they resolved to put Thadwick onto a better path.

In their private parlour, Thalia was on a lounge with her husband, Beaufort, leaning into him.

"I'm not sure I should have let him go," she said, showing an uncertainty she would reveal to very few. Hours ago, Thadwick had left the estate for the first time since the star seed was purged from him.

"Keeping him here only would have driven him further from us," Beaufort said. "He has two bronze-rankers with him."

Thalia nodded.

"I chose Kyle and Geoffrey carefully," she said. "They're the most reliable people in our household guard. Still registered adventurers, although they are no longer active."

"They normally work the spirit coin farm, right?" Beaufort asked.

"Yes. I pulled them off it to give Thadwick the most reliable protection I could. Including from himself."

"There you are, then," Beaufort said. "They won't let him do anything too self-destructive. Do you know where he went?"

"One of his Old City brothels," Thalia said. "I had a tracker placed on him with ritual magic while he was still recovering. He doesn't know it's there."

There was a hammering on the door.

"Lord Mercer! Lady Mercer!"

It was the voice of their family butler, Crivens, in an uncharacteristic panic. Thalia and Beaufort got up and went to the door together.

"What is it?" Beaufort asked.

"My lord, my lady. A representative of the Adventure Society just arrived. She claims to have important and time-sensitive news but refuses to speak with anyone but you directly."

"Where have you put her?" Beaufort asked.

"She approached the manor discretely, my lord, even bypassing our alarms and protections. I thought it best, then to place her in the black parlour."

"Well considered, as always, Crivens," Beaufort said.

"Thank you, my lord."

The black parlour was underground, a clandestine meeting place for the family's most private meetings. The only access was from a heavily protected elevating platform that only a few family and the most trusted and requisite staff could access. Thalia and Beaufort took the platform down and found that the Adventure Society representative was no lesser personage than the Deputy Director, Genevieve Picot. The Elderly elf looked perfectly comfortable amongst the black cushions and dark wood of the black parlour, getting up to greet the pair.

"Deputy Director," Thalia greeted as they all took seats. "I was told your business was urgent."

"Quite so," Genevieve said. "I won't waste time on niceties. You are, I take it, familiar with the office of monitoring at the Adventure Society."

"Yes," Thalia said. "Their primary task is to monitor the tracking stones of the adventurers, in case any of them die."

"Yes," Genevieve said. "Roughly an hour ago, the office brought to my attention an issue with two of the stones. The adventurers linked to them weren't dead, but the stones were no longer able to track them. Something we have seen before."

"The five who were implanted with star seeds," Thalia said.

"Yes," Genevieve said. "As best we can tell, their auras have changed sufficiently that the aura imprint we have for them is no longer effective. I was distressed to discover that the two adventurers in question are no longer active, but now work for your household."

Thalia and Beaufort shared a dread-filled glance.

"Kyle and Geoffrey," Beaufort said.

"Yes," Genevieve said. "Why did you guess them?"

"Because they are out with our son right now," Thalia said.

"What about Thadwick?" Beaufort asked.

"He was never attuned to a new badge after the expedition," Thalia said. "They aren't tracking him, but I am."

She took a stone from her pocket and tapped it twice. Shortly thereafter, Crivens arrived on the elevating platform.

“Crivens, get the team I have tracking Thadwick. The whole team; bring them here as quickly and as quietly as you can.”

Thalia and Beaufort probed Genevieve for more details but there was little she could tell them, beyond that it was being handled with as much discretion as possible. Both the Adventure Society Director and the interim director from the inquiry team had made very clear to the monitoring office how to handle this kind of situation.

The people who were tracking Thadwick appeared with unfortunate haste.

“We were already looking for you my lady, my lord. Several minutes ago, the tracker on Young Master Thadwick stopped working.”

Thadwick returned to the Mercer estate with his two guardians in tow. They had barely made it through the gate before Thadwick’s mother teleported to greet them. The two guards bowed their heads respectfully while a disgruntled expression crossed Thadwick’s face.

“Thadwick, dear. I do hope you found your time out relaxing.”

“It was fine. I’m going back to my room.”

“Of course,” Thalia said. “If you need anything, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“I know how servants work, Mother.”

“I meant me, dear. I thought maybe we could spend some more time together. Your father, as well. As a family.”

“Whatever,” Thadwick said, walking around her.

“You go ahead, dear,” Thalia said. “I’d just like a word with your boys, here.”

Thadwick stopped and turned around.

“You want them to tell you everything I did,” he accused. “Let me save you the trouble. I went to Old City and I had some women. One, then a pair, then one again to round out the afternoon. Are you happy?”

“As long as you enjoyed it, dear. I’ll have someone from the church of the Healer swing by and deal with anything you might have picked up.”

“No,” Thadwick said. “I already paid someone.”

“I think it would be best if I got someone in, dear.”

“I don’t care what you think would be best! I told you it’s fine. Why won’t you ever trust the things I say.”

“I’m sorry, dear. If you say it’s alright, then I’ll say no more.”

“Good,” Thadwick said, then turned and stormed off. Thalia watched him go, then turned to the two bodyguards.

“So?” she asked.

“As he said, my lady. He was quite aggressive, but the owner knows to keep their mouth shut and was paid to see they remember that.”

“Very good,” Thalia said. “If anything else comes up I want to know immediately, however minor it seems.”

“Of course, milady.”

“Back to your posts, then. I want my son taken care of.”

Thalia arrived in the black parlour, where Genevieve and Beaufort were still present.

“Well?” Beaufort asked.

“That is not our son,” Thalia said.

“You think he’s been seeded again?” Beaufort asked.

“This is something else,” Thalia said. “The personality is right on but I know his aura, both with and without the seed. It was off, at a fundamental level. What came home is some kind of double he is projecting into from some other location.”

“Is that even possible?” Beaufort asked.

“It is,” Thalia said. “We can use whatever that thing is upstairs to track back to our son, but whoever is on the other end will know right away and get on the move. They can only be so far away, though, so if we have people ready to act in the city, we have a good chance of catching them.”

“If that really isn’t our son.”

“It’s not,” Thalia said with certainty. “Our son is out there somewhere and he needs us.”

“Then we have to act now and we have to do it right,” Beaufort said. “We’re not losing him again.”

Thalia nodded, her face wracked with guilt and pain. “He hadn’t even recovered from what they did to him before and they’re victimising him again. Why do they want him so much?”

“Hopefully, we can answer that when we get him back,” Genevieve said. “What about the bodyguards?”

“Their auras are definitely off but it’s subtle,” Thalia said. “My guess is they’re seeded and have something to mask their auras to appear normal. I could only tell because I know their auras and have strong enough aura senses to see through it.”

“We need to get moving on this,” Beaufort said. “With Kyle and Geoffrey compromised we can’t mobilise our own people without giving the game away. The

Kettering's have people in Old City, I'll talk to them about getting people ready to move once we trace Thad's location."

"I'll prep the people I had tracking Thadwick," Thalia said. "They have the expertise to backtrack from whatever or whoever this double is to our boy."

"I'll return to the Adventure Society," Genevieve said. "I'll update the Director and Interim Director and marshal what forces I can put together quietly. I'll coordinate with the Kettering family."

"We don't want these people realising that we're going to move on them," Beaufort said. "Thalia, as soon as our people are confident they have a way to trace Thad, we strike."

Kyle and Geoffrey were stationed outside Thadwick's room. Located in the main family section, on the top floor of one of the towers, the hallway was large and flooded with light from a ceiling largely made of glass.

The two guards seemed to sense something was wrong. Although Thalia was walking casually toward her son's room, something about the way she was carrying herself tipped them off. The result, for Kyle and Geoffrey, was horrifying.

Their bodies split apart, segmenting at the joints. Knees and elbows, wrists, ankles, shoulders; all tearing audibly apart. Both men died instantly, rictuses of pain and terror frozen on their dead faces. Their bodies were now strung together by wires, like poorly made puppets, complete with jerky movements. The guards had gone from people to monstrosities of flesh and metal.

What concerned Thalia the most was the aura coming off the two corpse puppets. Moments ago they had been living bronze rankers. Now they were horrifying abominations giving off silver-rank auras. Thalia flashed back to the expedition, with its construct monsters and bizarre cultists. That was the moment everything started falling apart with her son and the magic surged up inside her.

Thalia Mercer was a silver-rank adventurer, and far from a weak one. She might not be the equal of her friend and team mate, Danielle Geller, but she was still a powerhouse in her own right. With the might, potent, swift and onslaught essences, in terms of pure explosive power she was a match for any adventurer alive. It was certainly too much for the two gangly, awkward creatures that had moments ago been people. Under the barrage of a furious Thalia, they were soon ripped apart, their metal components just as torn to pieces as their flesh.

Thalia didn't bother to open Thadwick's door. She blasted it to splinters with a special attack and moved in, finding the facsimile of her son in what looked like a state of melting, clay that had seemed like flesh oozing off an iron skeleton. Thalia immediately called in the ritualists, yelling at them to focus as their attention was arrested by the dead flesh puppets and the iron-clay doppelganger degrading in front of them.

Thadwick had been in the ritual circle for hours, connected to his mystical double. Now he had been pulled out of it as a pair of ritualists methodically eradicated any element that could be used to track their location. All around them, other people were packing up supplies into dimensional bags, stripping the building of anything that could be used against them.

"What was that?" Timos yelled at Thadwick.

Timos had quickly come to regret going along with Thadwick's aggressive self-recruitment. Rather than a useful pawn within the aristocracy, he was a one-man disaster. Timos had been operating in Greenstone for years without so much as a sniff of detection, yet within hours Thadwick was bringing everything down on their heads. From openly approaching him to failing to immediately giving the game away, Timos was mentally berating himself for not just killing Thadwick and his bodyguards, then dumping them in a canal. If he had been thinking straight, he assured himself, he would never have risked so much on a petulant teenager.

Timos was a man who valued methodical patience, but their allies in the church of Purity were ruining everything with their haste. Despite the cult's warnings that they should wait until the monster surge, the church were insistently impatient, forced them to move forward before everything was fully in place.

Their precipitous actions left them with little margin for error, where every mistake threatened to snowball into disaster. The degree to which their activities had been uncovered even in such a provincial area as Greenstone spoke volumes. Timos was, for once, grateful he wasn't assigned to one of the more crucial regions. The troubles they would face in a city full of top-shelf adventurers made him shudder. Even then, he would happily trade a dangerous enemy for an ally like Thadwick.

"Our people have been working in plain sight for years," Timos admonished Thadwick. "Years! You can't manage more than a few hours?"

"I warned you that my mother had strong aura senses," Thadwick spat back. "You're the one who was so certain this fake would work."

"What was the last thing you saw before the connection was cut?" Timos asked.

“People coming into the room after my mother. Two of her ritualists, I think.”

Timos snarled like an animal.

“We have to move quickly,” he said. “They’ll be all over this place soon.”

“Aren’t your people eliminating the link?” Thadwick asked.

“You don’t stay hidden in this city for as long as we have by assuming our people are better than Thalia Mercer’s people.”

“My mother isn’t that impressive.”

“Yes, Thadwick, she is,” Timos said. “How you turned out this way is a complete mystery.”

“If you knew how great she was, then why did you try and deceive her?”

Timos flinched, not happy to have his own contribution to the current disaster pointed out.

“Because our methods weren’t devised by locals but bestowed on us from above,” Timos said. “Unfortunately, your pathetic little city didn’t warrant to best tools.”

Once the building had been divested of any trace of the cult and its activities, Timos led his people, including Thadwick, through an illegally-made and well-concealed hole in the floor, down to the water utility tunnels running under Old City. The tunnels had stone walkways on either side, elevated above the water channels running through the middle.

They hurried along, Timos consulting a map as they went. The dank tunnels echoed, Timos signalling a stop as they heard something. It was a sound of footsteps and whistling, coming from a person who emerged from a side tunnel and not far in front of them.. He was of middle years, with loose overalls and a laden tool belt.

“Well, hello,” he said. “You folks must be pretty lost to all wind up here, but old Frank will see you...”

Frank never got to finish his sentence, his corpse falling as Timos’ conjured spear vanished, leaving a ragged hole in Frank’s throat. Timos kicked the body off the walkway and into the water channel before hurrying on once more.

Days passed and after the initial, covert search, the city’s resources were brought fully to bear. The Adventure Society and Magic Society, along with all the noble families were recruited into the effort. The revelation about the nature of their enemy went from restricted to common knowledge, sending waves of concern through the populace. The information was released to make it clear that anyone harbouring the enemy would face the harshest retribution.

The search threw the city into chaos. The cult had been much more careful about their activities than the likes of local criminals, whose clandestine operations were less thoroughly hidden. These were the one flushed out by the search as the cult slipped quietly into the dark.

The search was not helped by lack of competent iron-rankers. Usually the rank and file of the Adventure Society, their absence due to Emir's expedition left only the dregs. They were called into action regardless, many of whom hadn't taken a contract in years. Thugs, criminals, arena fighters, most of which had been malingering at iron rank for years. They were pulled in, nonetheless.

Not every hidden cultist escaped. Adric Dorgan was not only effective in determining when the search was wasting its time on ordinary criminals, but had at least some sense of the cultist supply network. From his direction, a number of raids turned up cultists, although to little effect. When captured, the crystal stars exploded from inside them, leaving behind only uninformative scraps of shredded flesh.

As the city was scoured, a series of bandit raids took place out in the delta, killing and plundering supplies. They were made against the holdings of numerous families, mostly soft targets who relied on the threat of retribution for security. The attacks against more secure locations made it clear who the primary target of the attacks was.

Almost every raid that employed greater coordination on more difficult targets was made against Mercer family holdings. It was also plain that they had insider information, hitting weak points in security, quickly and efficiently taking only the most valuable goods.

The Mercers swiftly realised that Thadwick's knowledge of their operations, schooled into him by his father, were being used against them. They made rapid changes and, with the support of Adventure Society personnel, set a series of ambushes that ravaged the attackers. The fallen and the captured exploding into crystal stars confirmed that the cult were behind the attacks, but again there were no prisoners to interrogate.

In a small village on the outskirts of the delta, Timos and Thadwick were in the common room of an inn. Like the rest of village's inhabitants, the tavern owners were dead.

"First you were useless as an infiltrator," Time berated Thadwick. "Now your usefulness as an expert on Mercer family security is at an end because they've used what you know to turn the tables and set up traps. We've lost people any one of which are worth ten of you. So, what I need from you right now is a reason not to kill you and leave you to your family to find."

"You wouldn't," Thadwick said.

“No?” Timos asked. “I’m pretty sure that if they at least found your body, the pressure on us would lessen, if only a little.

“What do you even need to raid supplies for?” Thadwick asked. “What about those supply ships you’ve been using?”

“Are you an idiot? Look at who I’m asking. Adric Dorgan has been relentless in digging out our supply lines,” Timos said. “If it wasn’t for our local support we would be completely hamstrung, and I’m starting to suspect he knows who they are.”

“Who are they?” Thadwick asked.

“Do you seriously think I would tell you anything that could compromise us? I had you brought here in a closed carriage to make sure you didn’t find some way to reveal our location!”

“If Dorgan is the one pressuring your supplies, then kill him,” Thadwick suggested. “What do you care about some crime lord?”

“That crime lord’s daughter is the Director of the Adventure Society, you idiot. You think things are bad now? We have every silver ranker who they can motivate searching for us. You kill the Director’s father and you can be damn sure she’ll motivate the rest. So, for now, we need to supply from elsewhere. Which was your family stores because we had you. Now, you’re worthless.”

“I’ll show you worthless...”

Timos’ backhand slap across Thadwick’s face was punishingly loud.

“You’ll shut your damn mouth,” Timos said. “Like it or not, you’re one of us, now. That means you do what you’re told until we figure out if you’re even worth keeping alive. I cannot wait until your worthless city and everyone in it are dead.”

“What?” Thadwick asked.

“Oh, didn’t I mention?” Timos said with a gleeful grin. “Our astral expert, before he was stupidly killed off, determined that the next astral space we claim will be a little unusual, due to some specifics of its connection to your world.”

As he spoke, Timos moved toward Thadwick, slow and intimidating as Thadwick backed away.

“The astral space is anchored too far away to reduce your city to astral dust, sadly. The good news is the secondary wave of destruction that will scour this horrid delta, with it’s wet heat and awful insects, right along with the city and the even worse vermin that infest it.”

“My family...” Thadwick said weakly.

“Have you not been paying attention?” Timos asked. He was standing right up close to Thadwick, who had backed into the tavern bar. “You betrayed your family, Thadwick. Making you one of us instead of a wet corpse was a mistake but it’s made, now.”

“My father,” Thadwick said. “We could bring him into the fold.”

“That wouldn’t work, Thadwick. He’s not an entitled child, willing to grasp at whoever offers him the power he thinks he deserves. He will never serve the Builder, but you do, and one way or another, I’m going to get some use out of you.”

Chapter 173: Take the Loot and Go

The last set of stairs led Jason into a hallway that looped around in a ring, a huge circuit he estimated to be almost as wide as the full tower. The outer wall of the hallway was the familiar stone, while the inner wall was solid glass; a single, curved pane that looped in a giant circle. Through the glass was a library, softly lit by magical chandeliers, hanging from the ceiling. The circular space was haphazard in design, with shelves set out at strange, seemingly random angles instead of in neat rows.

Walking along the hall, Jason encountered other stairwells, much like the one he had entered through. He soon found other adventurers that had used them. His first encounter was one of the foreign adventurers he didn't know. They shared a wary nod of greeting and kept moving around the loop together. More people joined them, including, Humphrey, Beth, Valdis and Valdis' team member, Sigrid.

"Were you all told to execute a whole group of people?" Humphrey asked.

"Yeah," Jason said. "I thought I was done when I refused, but here we are."

"Same," Valdis said. "I choose who I kill and why. I'm not some blind executioner."

"I killed them all," one of the other adventurers said, his face harrowed. "It was awful, but I'll do whatever it takes. We aren't all princes and outworlders. Some of us have to fight up from nothing, even if it means soiling our hands to do it."

Jason frowned but said nothing. While he had his own struggles, there was no question that many good things had been handed to him.

There were nineteen adventurers gathered together before Shade finally appeared.

"Adventurers," Shade said. "You have all passed the trials and proven worthy of the Order's legacy. Please step through the glass."

They reached out to touch the glass wall. Many had done so previously, finding it hard and warm to the touch. Now it was thick, like molasses, yet permeable, their hands passing right through. They all stepped forward, moving into the library.

Their group followed Shade through the oddly-placed shelves to the middle of the library, where shelves gave way to tables. There were books stacked on them, collected into a series of neat, identical piles. What drew their attention, though, was the circular dais at the very centre. Resting upon it was a heavy metal rack containing a single object: a large scythe, stylised well outside of practicality as weapon or tool. The blade was made from silver and the shaft from gold, inlaid with obsidian polished to a gem-like finish.

Shade reached out to touch one of the book piles.

“Each of these collections contains the collected teachings of the Order of the Reaper,” Shade said. “How to move in silence, to walk unseen. How to pass through locked doors and trapped rooms unimpeded. How to kill. These are no ordinary books. For each volume there are two copies. One is a skill book, the other, a written guide. The guides, however, are more than simply words on a page.”

Shade picked up a book, holding it up to show a blue gem set into the cover. He touched the gem and an ephemeral image of a man appeared.

“This is the first volume of the Way of the Reaper,” the image said. “It details the first form of our order’s complete martial technique. Turn to any page and I will instruct you.”

Shade returned the book to the pile and the image disappeared.

“Each of you have proven yourselves to embody the virtues the Order once held,” Shade said. “Though the Order may be gone, its legacy can be secure through bestowing its knowledge to those who exemplify its ideals.”

One of the shadow gates rose up from the floor.

“Please,” Shade said. “Each of you may take a collection and go. The trials are complete.”

“Hold on,” one of the adventurers called out. “What about the scythe?”

“What about it?” Shade asked.

“Who gets it?”

“No one,” Shade said. “It remains here.”

“We were told that whoever passed the trials would get the scythe,” Valdis said.

“I am responsible for enacting the trials in the ways with which I have been charged,” Shade said. “I am not responsible for what you have been told by anyone else.”

“Well, I’m going to take it anyway,” another adventurer said. “Call it a memento.”

She moved forward to take the scythe, but the moment she moved over the dais, she dropped like a sack of meat, moving no further.

“The scythe is an object of death,” Shade said. “To go near it is to die.”

“So you’re saying we need to carry it out on a long stick,” Jason said.

“You are certainly welcome to try,” Shade invited.

Rather than pick up the books as directed, the adventurers formed clusters, immediately entering into a discussion about the scythe.

“There has to be a way to take it.”

“Maybe there’s a hidden, extra trial.”

“Obviously, but what would it be?”

“Maybe figuring out how to take the scythe is the trial.”

Jason, Humphrey, Valdis and Sigrid formed their own group.

“What do we think?” Valdis asked.

“I’m taking the books and leaving,” Jason said.

“You don’t want the cloud palace?” Valdis asked.

“I want the cloud palace,” Jason said. “What I don’t want is that scythe.”

Humphrey narrowed his eyes at Jason.

“You’ve figured it out.”

“Nope,” Jason denied. “I just think that what comes with getting that scythe is trouble best avoided.”

“Really?” Valdis asked. “You’ve come this far and you want to give up?”

“Yes,” Jason said. “I’m going to take the loot and go.”

“You don’t strike me as the giving-up kind,” Valdis said.

“Watch me,” Jason said. “I’m giving up on the scythe and I advise you all to do the same.”

Jason took one of the stacks of books, placed it in his inventory and walked through the obsidian portal. This drew attention as he was the first to do so, but no one moved to stop him. One less person meant less competition for the scythe.

Jason emerged from the portal in another circular chamber he estimated to be the exact size of the library. This room was empty, however, aside from the dais in the middle. ON it was an exact replica of the scythe he had already seen. The only light was right above the scythe, a plain, magical lamp that illuminated the weapon but left the rest of the room steeped in shadow. Shade appeared next to Jason, who spotted him through the perception power that allowed him to see through darkness.

“I thought that portal was meant to take me out of here,” Jason said.

“Your time here is not done,” Shade said.

“You said we were done.”

“The final trial tests the virtue of insight,” Shade said. “The ability see beyond appearances to grapple with the truth.”

“I truly want to get out of here, if that helps.”

Quest: [The Hidden Trial]

The invigilator of the trials has realised the revelation you’ve had about the true purpose of the trials.

- Objective: Reveal the true purpose of the trials and claim the scythe.
- Reward: ???.

“Decline,” Jason said to the screen. “Decline, decline, decline.”

➤ This quest cannot be declined.

“Bloody hell.”

“You have had insights about this place,” Shade said. “You tried to warn your friends away.”

“Just general suspicions,” Jason said.

“Tell me what you have realised..”

“I realise how much I want to leave,” Jason said, his hand snaking into his clothes and around the escape medallion dangling from his neck on a cord. He pressed his aura into it and it dissolved into nothing.

- You have used [Medallion of Escape].
 - Trial invigilator [Shade] has revoked your escape privileges.
 - [Medallion of Escape] does not take effect.
-

“Oh, that’s just not fair.”

“I will hear what you have to say before you leave this place.”

“Let me out of here,” Jason said. “Hear that.”

“You have seen the truth, Jason Asano. Speak it, or you will not be released from this place.”

“How is that fair?”

“If someone promised you fairness, Jason Asano, they lied.”

Jason groaned.

“Do you have some kind of mind reading powers?” he asked.

“I have merely been watching you closely, along with all the others. You have had a revelation to which you refuse to give voice.”

“And if I promise to keep not giving voice to it, can I go?”

“Say it.”

“I don’t want to say it. I don’t want the ramifications. You could kill me for it. I’d kill me for it. Killing me would be the smart move.”

“You have greater value than as a corpse.”

“I’m not looking for new employment.”

Before Shade could answer, Humphrey appeared through the archway.

“I thought this was meant to take us out,” Humphrey said.

Jason groaned again.

“You figured it out?” Jason asked him.

“Figured what out?” Humphrey asked. “I was just taking your advice and getting out.”

Jason looked at Shade. “So, everyone comes through here?”

“No,” Shade said. “I decided that you needed further motivation. Now your friend is trapped here with you, for as long as you refuse to talk.”

“That just implicates him,” Jason complained.

“Then I suggest you speak up before I bring more of your friends to this place,” Shade said.

“Jason, what’s going on?” Humphrey asked.

Jason sighed.

“It’s about what this place is for,” Jason said. “Its true purpose.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about what it took to get here,” Jason said. “Emir is an expert at finding things and even he took the better part of two years, a huge staff and a slew of hired adventurers to find this place and everything he needed to open it up. He’s a gold-ranker with exactly the right skill set and resources to get the job done and it still took more time and money than we’ve seen since becoming adventurers.”

“So?” Humphrey asked.

“So, after all that, the only people who can get in here are iron-rankers. But the grand prize, the scythe, is useless to an iron-ranker aside from what they can trade it for.”

“What are you getting at?”

“The purpose of these trials isn’t to bestow some legacy of a long-dead organisation of murderers. Think about it. Centuries of stories; legends of an ancient order of assassins and the grand treasure they left behind. Clues hidden around the world, finally pieced together at great time and cost. Why? To give some iron-ranker a pile of books and maybe an overwrought harvesting tool?”

“Then what are the trials for?”

“They’re here to create the legend,” Jason said. “If you’re telling stories about an ancient order of assassins that got wiped out, you know what you aren’t doing?”

“What?”

“Asking whether they got wiped out at all. I’m willing to bet that most of the story holds up. A coalition of churches coming together to hunt them down and root them out. But these were the world’s greatest assassins. You really think that none of them got away? Of course they did. Some of them, at least. Then they created these trials, hid away the keys to open them and started dropping rumours and stories. Just enough to linger through the centuries.”

“You think the Order of the Reaper still exists?”

“I do,” Jason said. “I’m willing to bet they operate very differently, now. Smaller numbers, different methods. My guess is that their first tenet now is secrecy.”

“This why you didn’t want us to go for the scythe,” Humphrey said. “You didn’t want us getting caught up with the Order.”

“Exactly.”

“Are they going to kill us?”

“Probably,” Jason said. “I would.”

“Then why have the hidden trial at all?”

“To catch anyone who figures it out,” Jason said. “If people leave with a pile of ancient knowledge from an order of assassins long gone, then the legend of their demise carries on. If someone figures it out, though, they want to deal with those people. Only letting in iron-rankers keeps out anyone who can really investigate this place. The scythe is bait, so some high-ranker would eventually go to the effort of getting some iron-rankers inside. The ones quick enough to figure it out they can take aside and deal with.”

➤ **Objective complete: Reveal the true purpose of the trials 1/1.**

Jason sighed.

“Sorry, Humphrey,” he said. “They brought you in because I refused to admit that I twigged to what was happening.”

“It was rather obvious that you’d realised something,” Humphrey said.

“Very good, Jason Asano,” Shade said.

“Is this the part where you kill us?”

“That would be a waste,” Shade said. “As you said, the Order operates very differently, now. It does not maintain a roster of assassins at all. Rather, we make connections. Quiet allies. A job worth doing is worth doing well, therefore to do a job well you must find someone who thinks it’s worth doing. That is what we do; find jobs that require doing and match them to the person who thinks doing them is worthwhile.”

“So, you’re talking about a volunteer network,” Jason said.

“Something like that,” Shade said. “The fall of the original Order of the Reaper was not unwarranted. The founding purpose of the Order was to do what was necessary. Over time, it became more controlling, seeking to rule from the shadows, rather than serve. The new structure was designed to place the power to act in the hands of others. To let their judgement and conscience be the guide.”

“That’s what the tests are for,” Jason said. “To find people with the principles you want in an agent.”

“Yes.”

“What if we say no?” Jason asked. “What if we don’t want to be part of your order?”

“It is not my order,” Shade said. “I am merely an administrator for this trial. There are other such tests, looking for people and taking many forms. Once this one is done, my obligations to the Order are done. As for you, you are not being invited to the Order. All that is being asked of you is that you be open to it, should the Order find a task to which you are suited.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Jason said. “Like standing at the top of a slippery slope. It’s fine, because you’re at the top. What about the other people in the trial? You’ll use them too, right?”

“If the right circumstance and person come together, then we will use anyone.”

“How does that work? A person just happens across a situation where their natural inclination will be to intervene?”

“Just so.”

“And what makes you think Humphrey and I won’t talk?”

“Your reluctance to speak even to me demonstrates that you have the wisdom to understand the repercussions of doing so. As for Humphrey Geller, he never learned about it in the first place.”

Humphrey disappeared into thin air and Jason snorted a laugh.

“That’s the duplicating magic you used for the old resolve test, right?”

“It is,” Shade said.

“So now I just go?”

“You should take the scythe with you, first.”

“Wait, I can really take the scythe?”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t think you’d let me take it. Actually, that makes sense. It really rams home the idea that the Order is dead and gone. Otherwise, why would they leave the very symbol of their order to languish in some diamond-rankers collection like any old trinket.”

“Indeed.”

“What about the whole object of death thing?”

“That only applies to the replica in the room below.”

“What do I tell people about how I got the scythe?”

“Use your ingenuity.”

“That’s helpful.”

“If you cannot figure that much out, then you wouldn’t be much use to the Order.”

“I don’t much want to be.”

He wandered over to the scythe, slowing down as he approached.

“You’re sure there’s no instant death field?”

“Yes.”

“How do I know you’re not lying?”

“You don’t.”

“That’s terrific.”

“You may leave without it, if you like.”

“Just because I take this, it doesn’t mean I’m willing to be your assassin.”

“I think you’ll find that if ever the Order does contact you, Jason Asano, the circumstances will be more complicated and nuanced than a simple assassination.”

“Just Jason, is fine.”

“I would prefer to refer to you as Mr Asano.”

“Whatever rows your boat, cobber.”

With a steeling breath, Jason moved up to the scythe and grabbed it.

Item: [Scythe of the Reaper] (diamond rank, legendary)

The symbolic legacy of the Order of the Reaper (tool, scythe).

- Effect: ???
- Effect: ???
- Effect: ???
- Effect: ???
- Effect: ???

The scythe wouldn’t budge from its rack.

“Why is it stuck?” Jason asked. “I thought you said I could take it.”

“It is not affixed in place,” Shade said. “You simply lack the strength to shift its weight.”

“Huh.”

After a series of attempts that failed to so much as shift the scythe on its rack, Jason came up with something new. Standing right up to the scythe, he opened his inventory window on the other side. Then, with one hand on the scythe, he stepped back, the window following. When it touched the scythe, the weapon vanished, appearing in his inventory as an icon. Jason looked at it with satisfaction.

“Nice.”

Quest: [The Hidden Trial]

- Objective complete: Claim the scythe 1/1.
 - Quest complete.
 - 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have
 - [Reaper Token] has been added to your inventory.
-

“Okay,” Jason said wearily. “I am really ready to get out of here.”

He headed back in the direction of the archway he had come in through. He was about to step in when someone stepped out. It was Sigrid, Valdis team member.

“What are you doing here?” Jason asked, stepping back to give her space.

“I’m not sure,” Sigrid said, looking around. “Where is here?”

“She figured it out,” Shade said.

“I realised that the reason you wanted out was to avoid the attention of the Order of the Reaper that still existed.”

“Well, congratulations,” Jason said. “Shade can explain everything; I’m out. I took the scythe by the way, so you’ll have to ask Shade if he has a spare.”

“A spare?”

“Shade,” Jason said, pointing at the archway. “Does this thing actually go where I want, this time?”

“It does.”

“Great,” Jason said, patting Sigrid on the shoulder. “I’ll see you on the other side.”

Chapter 174: Making an Exit

The shadow gate took Jason from the tower at the heart of the city to one of those at the city's edge. He emerged at the base of one of the archway towers, not far from where ruins gave way to sea. He was surrounded by other adventurers, milling about, regrouping or making their way up the stairs that wound their way around the tower.

He was immediately bombarded with messages as contacts and party members came into range. His team quickly contacted him through voice chat, relieved that he had come back alive. Humphrey had already arrived, surprised that Jason hadn't appeared first, and told the team about the tests they faced.

From the crowd gathered, Shade seemed to have sent everyone to the same tower to exit. Jason quickly found Humphrey, easily identified as he stood taller than everyone but the few leonids and draconians, for a face to face conversation.

"What happened?" Humphrey asked. "I left right after you, but you're only arriving now?"

"Shade wanted a quiet chat," Jason said softly, not wanting to draw attention. Humphrey raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

"Did you...?"

"Yeah," Jason answered and Humphrey shook his head.

"I never should have doubted you."

"You doubted me?"

"No, now that I think about it."

Jason laughed slapping Humphrey on the shoulder.

"Let's go track down everyone else."

Clive and Neil had teamed up with Beth's team, minus Beth herself who was absent along with Jason and Humphrey. While plenty of groups were taking their last opportunity to hunt treasure, they had taken it upon themselves to look for cultists. Clive had brought along everything he could think of to track potential cultist activity, but had come up empty.

Jason and Humphrey met up with Clive and Neil, who led everyone to where Jory and Sophie had set up a comfortable space to wait out everyone else. Rather than go off in search of fresh enemies or last-minute treasure, they had picked out a nice spot by the water, strung up a camp shade and a hammock, laid down a blanket and put out a folding chair. Sophie relaxed in the hammock as Jory sat contentedly in the chair, both reading books.

Jason and Humphrey converged on the little camp, arriving just after Clive, Neil and Beth's team. The greetings were warm with relief at having passed through weeks of life-threatening danger. The feeling of having survived everything and knowing they were safe for the moment was amazing, only heightened by the bitter knowledge that not every team was so lucky. Even Sophie joined in the welcoming hugs, at least for Humphrey. Jason she gave a look up and down and a simple, "you didn't die then."

"Disappointed?" he asked.

"I'm glad you're alive," she conceded. "There'd be a bunch of legal trouble with my indenture if you died."

"That seems harsh," Neil said. "And that's coming from someone who was vaguely hoping he would at least get maimed a little."

"Oh, I'm feeling the love here," Jason said.

"You did almost kill her," Jory said. "It took me and a priest of the Healer to cleanse that curse and the poison you loaded her up with. Even then, it was a near thing."

They expanded Jory's camp space with more chairs and a refreshments table filled with sandwiches and iced tea. As they settled in, Sophie sat next to Jason on a soft rug, casually knocking her shoulder into his.

"I am glad you didn't die," she said softly, as if the reluctant sincerity of her words were a skittish animal that would run off when startled. Jason flashed her a trademark impish grin.

"While our esteemed team leaders have been trying to get themselves killed over a scythe no one apparently got their hands on," Clive said, "the rest of us were looking into the cultist problem. I've been concentrating our search around the tower, because these towers ringing the city are the anchors that bind this astral space to our world. The cultists will have to disrupt them to sever that connection, so I've been looking for traces of magical interference. The towers are fascinating in themselves but, so far as I can tell, the one here is functioning unimpeded. It could be they're working on other towers, or using some kind of astral magic we've never heard of."

"Maybe the cultists didn't want to risk sending anyone," Humphrey suggested. "Emir's people were checking auras."

"No," Jason said. "The cultists could have either sent people who didn't have star seeds or people who've had star seeds so long that the aura imprint the Magic Society has for them includes the seed."

"You think the cult has been in Greenstone long enough for that?" asked Mose.

Mose Cavendish was Beth's cousin, an elf with destructive fire and wind spells who Jason and Humphrey had shared a contract with in the past. A classic glass cannon, he had worked hard since then to earn a spot on his cousin's team.

"They've definitely been in Greenstone for a while," Neil said. "You don't operate on the scale we've seen without people taking notice. Not unless you build up very slowly and very carefully."

"The question on my mind, then," Humphrey said, "is whether Clive not finding anything is good or bad."

"Definitely bad," Jason said. "We're all about to evacuate. If I was a deeply committed cultist – and the fact that they all explode when caught suggests they are – then I wouldn't try anything with everyone here. I'd stay behind and get the job done once we're all gone. Presumably, being trapped here only lasts until the astral space is cut loose and the Builder comes along to scoop it up."

"I'm not sure I'm following this conversation," said Hudson. He was the front-liner for Beth's team, even larger than Humphrey, with a propensity for conjuring walls of earth. Jason's team was unusual in how much they knew about the Builder cult and the threat they posed, Beth's team and Jory listening with horror as Clive took the time to explain.

During the explanation Beth rejoined her team. Valdis and Keane's teams also found their way to the camp, requiring Clive to backtrack his explanations a couple of times. That proved helpful, as the repetition helped those less quick at taking in the explanations of great astral beings, astral spaces and the idea of stealing them.

Some of the foreign adventurers already knew some of it, notably Valdis and Sigrid. Even they had little understanding of the mechanisms involved, however, and were impressed as Clive elucidated the various details.

"Are you sure you're happy with your current team?" Valdis asked him, earning a swat on the arm from Sigrid.

"Right in front of his team," Sigrid said. "You are shameless. Also, he's not going to agree to leave them while they're right in front of him. You have to take him aside, where you can explain how much better we are."

Jason burst out laughing. "And you say he's shameless."

Clive finished his explanation with the assumption that the Builder cult would be targeting the astral space they were currently in.

"So, what do we do?" Valdis asked. "It was clear, going in, that the cult would be after this astral space. Did anyone devise a plan to deal with that?"

“We had no idea what we would encounter,” Jason said. “Basically, we were told to keep our eyes open and trust our judgement.”

“In our earlier discussion, before you came along,” Clive said, “we concluded that the cultists among us will likely be stay behind while the rest evacuate before the astral space closes.”

“Leaving them free to do their work once everyone else is gone,” Valdis reasoned. “Disregarding the monsters those ghost-things and the flesh creatures, anyway. Could we try taking some kind of roster? All these teams were scoping each other out before we even came. I bet we could get a full list of participants, if we asked around.”

“Wouldn’t matter,” Sigrid said. “There’s no way of knowing who died or used their escape medallions to leave. We don’t even know if Shade sent people to other archway towers to leave. This looks like everyone, but we can’t be sure.”

“I don’t see anything we can do,” Humphrey said. “We don’t have much in the way of options that I can see, and we won’t have any once we leave. Staying behind as well is not an option, either. Success would mean being trapped here forever, while failure would leave us in the Builder’s hands.”

Valdis nodded. “I don’t see any worthwhile option, either. In which case, we may as well leave. There’s nothing left for us here.”

Jason, Beth and Humphrey looked at each other and shared a nod.

“Agreed,” Beth said. Keane’s team leader, Roland, did likewise..

They joined the steady stream of people already ascending the tower, chatting as they casually made their way around the spiralling stairs. The steps were stone pegs set into the tower wall, wide enough to go two by two. The teams mixed together, relaxing and chatting together now that they were almost out. The front cluster consisted of Valdis, Sigrid, Beth, Humphrey, Jason and Keane

“You know, I actually had a chance at the scythe,” Beth said.

“Really?” Valdis asked, shooting a glance at Sigrid.

“There was an extra room for people who figured out the last puzzle,” Beth said.

“What was the hidden trial?” Valdis asked.

“Best kept to myself, thank you,” Beth told him.

“That’s what Sigrid said,” Valdis complained.

“Then you should stop asking,” Sigrid told him.

“I was too late,” Beth said. “I was the fourth one there. I didn’t see who got the scythe because they’d already left. Unless Sigrid was lying and she took it before I got there.”

“I didn’t,” Sigrid said.

“According to Shade,” Beth said, “someone figured out the hidden trial before the rest of us knew there was one, which is how they went and claimed it so quickly.”

“That definitely wasn’t Sigrid, then,” Valdis said. “I was with her when she figured it out. Jason and Humphrey, you two were already gone. You practically leaped through that shadow gate.”

“I just wanted to get out before people turned on each other over the scythe,” Jason said.

“You say that,” Valdis said, “but if I recall correctly, Humphrey was wondering if you’d figured it out right before the pair of you made yourselves scarce. You were the first two through the gate.”

“Jason, did you get the scythe?” Keane asked.

“Of course not,” Jason said.

“He’s lying,” Sophie said from behind Jason. “You can tell when he’s lying.”

“How?” Valdis asked with eager curiosity.

“He’s awake,” Sophie said. “Even his body language is manipulative.”

“That’s true,” Humphrey said with a laugh.

“I’m feeling very put upon.”

“I know your pain,” Valdis said, giving Jason’s shoulder a commiserating pat. “My team gangs up on me, too.”

“You say gang up,” Sigrid said. “Somehow he always seem to outnumber us, even though there’s just one of him.”

“I can’t help having the virile verve of ten men,” Valdis said. “It’s just the way I am.”

“It’s a blessing and a curse right?” Jason asked.

“So true,” Valdis agreed.

“We should push them off the side,” Sigrid said.

“I don’t know about your guy,” Sophie said, “but ours has a slow fall power, so it’s no good.”

They reached the top, where Shade was guiding adventurers through the shadow gate in the middle of the flat roof. As Jason approached, Shade stopped him.

“Oh, what now?” Jason asked.

“You have the Reaper’s token,” Shade said.

“How do you know that?”

“I can sense it. I am connected to it.”

“Why?” Jason asked warily.

"I am a summoned being," Shade said. "I could be described as a familiar of this place, in the same way I was once the familiar of the man who built it. Like all familiars, I am an astral entity merely inhabiting this vessel. My true nature is a shadow of the Reaper."

"Wait," Jason said. "You mean the Reaper's actual shadow? As in, park a lamp next to the guy and whooshka, there you are?"

"The Reaper has many shadows," Shade said. "I am but one of a multitude."

"So, what does this token do, exactly?" Jason asked.

"Jason, we're holding up the line," Neil called forward. "People are getting grumpy."

"Go," Shade said to Jason. "Incorporate the token into your ritual of awakening."

Looking unhappily back at the press of adventurers, Jason went through the shadow gate. On the other side, in the once-drowned village at the bottom of the lake, Gary, Rufus and Emir's staff were greeting the adventurers as they returned through the archway. They sent the iron-rankers shuffling out of the way to make room for the constant stream behind them. Overhead, the magical dome kept out the water.

Jason spotted Emir, who was standing and talking with Constance. Next to him was his granddaughter, Ketis. A number of adventurers tried to approach but were turned away by more of his staff.

"Clive, go set up the air-bubble ritual," Jason said. "I'm going to chat with Emir and then we can go see some genuine sky, instead of the fake astral space one."

"I thought the astral space was quite nice," Neil said as Jason wandered off.

"Since when is he in charge?" Sophie asked.

"I'd give him this one," Humphrey told her.

"You mean," Sophie replied in little more than a whisper, "he really did get his hands on thing?"

"Yes," Humphrey said.

"Oh, no," Neil groaned.

"He's going to be so insufferably smug," Sophie said.

"He did beat all these people," Humphrey said. "This is not inconsiderable competition."

"I'd rather Beth won," Sophie said. "Or Sigrid. Anyone with some humility, really."

"So, anyone but Valdis, really," Clive exactly.

"I think you might want to follow his advice about setting up the ritual," Humphrey said to Clive. "We may welcome a quick escape very shortly."

“Good point,” Neil said. “Say what you will about Jason, I doubt it will involve the word understated.”

They headed in the direction of the closest dome wall. In the meantime, Jason approached the invisible cordon around Emir marked only by a pair of his staff.

“Greg,” Jason greeted.

“Asano.”

“Can I see him?”

Greg turned to glance at Emir, who nodded and Jason was allowed through. This did not go unnoticed by the other adventurers.

“Welcome back,” Emir said, wearily. “I heard that the arbiter of the trials refused the scythe to everyone.”

“He handed out plenty of books,” Jason said. “You’ll have no trouble filling the gaps in the young lady’s martial education. G’day, Ketis.”

“We’ve already heard that no one got the scythe,” Ketis said.

“Indeed we have,” Emir said. “We talked to a couple of people who passed all the trials and said it wasn’t given to anyone. Rufus thought differently, though.”

“Oh?” Jason asked.

“He said that you wouldn’t let something not being possible stop you. He bet me an exquisite bottle of wine that you’d come swaggering out, say something obnoxious and produce the scythe.”

“Well, of course I’m doing that,” Jason said. “I’m not a scrub.”

Jason held his hand out and the scythe appeared, immediately dropping to the ground. The shaft landing on its end smashed cobbles from the sheer weight, then it toppled over, cracking stone again as it crashed down.

“Watch out for that one,” Jason said. “There’s a bit of heft to it.”

“Constance,” Emir said urgently. Emir’s chief of staff took out a large black sheet and laid it on the ground. Emir was barely able to lift it, straining even his gold-rank strength to hold it up long enough for Constance to slip the sheet under it. After a moment resting on the sheet, gold and silver light started sparkling over it.

“The genuine article,” Emir said breathlessly, then looked up to see Jason had already strode off, his cloak now swirling around him as he made a beeline for his team at the edge of the dome. They were ready and waiting, their private air bubble like a growth on the side of the dome. Jason stepped into the platform with the rest of his team and they floated away.

While all eyes were on Jason, Rufus and Gary had moved to join Emir.

“What did I tell you?” Rufus asked Emir. “That man cannot help showing off.”

“You have to give it to him, though,” Gary said. “He knows how to make an exit. I don’t think he’s done, either. Are you seeing that?”

From within Jason’s cloak, blue-grey light was shining, emitting from beneath his skin. As he reached his team mates, the onlookers realised that the same light was shining not just from Jason but his entire team.

Quest: [Legacy of the Reaper]

- All objectives complete.
- Quest complete.

- Reward: Racial gift transfiguration.

Jason had been ignoring the objective completions of the quest because he had never expected to complete it. It was only now that he was willing to revel in the outlandish reward. He conjured his cloak to hide the idiotic grin so wide he felt it trying to unhinge the top of his head. Looking ahead to his team he saw the light start to shine from them and he hurried to meet them.

“It feels tingly,” Sophie said.

“I know you had that quest thing but I can’t believe I can actually do this,” Neil said.

“The paper I write on this is going to be so well-received,” Clive said.

“Well,” Humphrey said, putting a hand on Jason’s shoulder. “We’ve officially arrived now. You’d better believe word of this will be spreading around.”

“Let’s just go,” Jason said. They climbed on the ritual platform Clive had prepared and slid out of the dome. Light continued to shine from them as the assembled adventurers watched them drift away.

-
- Outworlder racial ability [Map] has evolved to [Tactical Map].

Ability: [Tactical Map]

- Transfigured from [Outworlder] ability [Map].
- Self-updating map. Unveils as areas are explored.
- A small, semi-opaque map allows tracking of nearby allies and enemies. This is a tracking effect.

“Mini-map, not bad,” Jason said as his team members looked at their own abilities.

-
- Party member [Clive Standish]'s human racial ability [Human Ambition] has evolved to [Thirst For Knowledge].
 - Party member [Neil Davone]'s elf racial ability [Life Affinity] has evolved to [Life Guard].
 - Party member [Sophie Wexler]'s celestine racial ability [Mana Integrity] has evolved to [Mana Wellspring].
 - Party member [Humphrey Geller]'s Human racial ability [Special Attack Affinity] has evolved to [Attack of the Mirage Dragon].
-

“Look at that,” Jason said. “Neil really is an elf.”

“Shut up, Asano.”

Chapter 175: Shallow Earth

The team had been eager to test out their new abilities as soon as they reached shore, but things were a little busy. While the iron-rankers were in the astral space, even more people had been awaiting their return. Many of the foreign adventurers had brought family, let alone the locals. The cloud palace had been placed offshore from a small town that had been going through what was essentially a festival for the better part of three weeks. The townsfolk were exhausted but increasingly wealthy, with towns and villages all around the lake being roped-in. A small army of very demanding visitors brought a tidal wave of money to the local economy.

Things were all the more vibrant now that a steady stream of adventurers was emerging from the lake and into the jubilant arms of family. Neil's family were present, more than happy to be keeping company with the Gellers. Humphrey's father and sister had returned to Greenstone while he was in the astral space and were waiting with his mother. Even Clive's parents had been roped in by Danielle Geller, looking very awkward next to Greenstone's most prestigious adventurer.

All she ever had was her now long-dead father, but Belinda was her sister now, coming out with a greeting hug. Jason looked at them all, a sense of isolation he hadn't felt in a long time creeping over him. In his old life, only his older sister's family had been close as he eschewed other people. He hadn't been happy, but he hadn't felt lonely, either.

He was overcome with the memory that this was not his world. His precious connections were also new connections. He had planted roots but they were still in shallow earth. Bringing his expression under control, he threw on a convincing grin and pulled out a recording stone.

"Hello family," he said brightly. "I'm back out of the lake now, job done. I won the little contest because it turns out I'm terrific, but the people up here don't know, yet, so I should probably not say that too loudly..."

Morning became afternoon became evening, Jason's team and their families making their way onto the cloud palace before word spread outside of their victory in Emir's contest. Stories of their adventures were told, delighting Humphrey's parents as much as it horrified Clive's. Clive's success in life had certainly enriched them, which to the hardworking Standish family meant a bigger eel farm. They had quite liked that their son had a nice, safe job in an office.

“You can’t keep someone with Clive’s talent cooped up,” Danielle told them. “Did you know Emir has been trying to hire him away?”

“So has Prince Valdis, from the Mirror Kingdom,” Humphrey said.

“Wait,” Clive’s mother said. “That Valdis you’ve been talking about is a prince?”

Sophie made a quiet exit, finding Jason hidden away, leaning over a balcony as he watched more adventurers emerge from the water to ebullient welcome. She leaned on the rail beside him, his gaze not moving.

“It’s not like you to miss a chance for self-aggrandisement,” she said but her voice was soft, without the usual sting.

“It’s family time,” Jason said. “Mine is so far away that gods can’t broach the distance. They’re so far away that there aren’t even gods, there.”

“Are you sure about that? You didn’t believe in magic, once, but here we are. Would it be so strange for it to be hidden from you, back on your world?”

“Knowledge told me that my world lacks the magic to support a god.”

“And you trust her, all of a sudden?”

“No, but I don’t think she’s ever lied to me,” Jason said. “She’s like me; why lie, when the facts will do it for you? She’s just better at it than I am.”

“If it makes a difference,” she said, “I think Danielle Geller is ready to adopt you.”

Jason chuckled and she pulled herself off the railing.

“Come back in,” she said. “What’s a gathering without you telling people how great you are?”

“Excuse me?” he asked, also standing up straight. “I’ll have you know that I’m incredibly humble. I challenge you to find someone more humble than me...”

The team finally snuck away to test out their new abilities, gathering in the guest hall training room. They didn’t escape entirely, with Humphrey’s mother, father and sister watching on from the behind the transparent wall of the observation room.

Compared to Danielle, her husband, Keith, was ore akin to their son; a solid and reliable counterpoint to her domineering charms. Their daughter, Henrietta, seemed to take her role of Humphrey’s older sister seriously. She made it clear that his teammates were yet to meet her approval. Even her stoic gaze had broken in incredulity, however, as Humphrey explained that the whole team got gone through simultaneous gift evolutions.

It was far from unknown for people to go through such events together, as the circumstances that pushed one person past their limits could easily affect another in the same way. Humphrey and Jason had experienced exactly that in their fight against the

hydra. For an entire team to do so was something else altogether. Despite some probing questions from Danielle and her daughter, the team had agreed to hide Jason's role as the catalyst.

There was no hiding that it had happened, though, and the team tested out their new abilities, where appropriate. Clive had been initially unhappy with his racial gift.

Ability: [Thirst For Knowledge]

- Transfigured from [Human] ability [Human Ambition].
- Essence abilities advance more quickly.
- Learn information through the use of skill books.

“Skill books? Skill books are for people too stupid to learn the proper way. No offence, Jason.”

“You and your skill-book prejudice,” Jason said. “There’s nothing wrong with being a utility guy. My racial gifts aren’t exactly cutting my enemies down like wheat. Think of all the mundane things you have to learn that take away from how you really want to spend your time. Now you can just skill book the unimportant stuff and spend your time where it really matters.”

“Huh,” Clive said thoughtfully. “I never that.”

“Take martial arts, for example,” Jason said. “You never took the time to learn hand-to-hand skills, but now you can skill-book them. They won’t match up to Sophie, or even me, with the time I’ve put in, but they may be the difference between life and death in a pinch.”

No one argued that Neil’s ability was anything but a boon to the team.

Ability: [Life Guard]

- Transfigured from [Elf] ability [Life Affinity].
- Effects used or received with a positive effect on life have greater effect.
- Using a shield-based essence ability on allies also bestows a heal-over-time effect.

They tested out the healing, which wasn’t especially potent but still noticeable. Where Neil’s ability restored health, Sophie’s replenished mana.

Ability: [Mana Wellspring]

- Transfigured from [Celestine] ability [Mana Integrity].
 - Ongoing mana costs for maintained abilities are reduced. Resistance to mana drain effects is increased.
 - When mana is not being consumed by an ongoing ability, mana regeneration for self and allies within your aura is significantly increased.
-

Clive's aura ability likewise increased mana regeneration and some quick testing with overlapping the auras revealed the combined effect was impressive.

"We're never going to run out of mana," Neil said as he watched his mana bar refill. Jason had shown them how to pull up indicators for mana, stamina and health.

"Speak for yourself," Humphrey said. "You may be underestimating how quickly I can burn through it. My dragon essence racial gift lets me burn mana to increase my physical and magical strength. If I use that and run through my powers one after the other, I can empty the tank very quickly.

"What about the new one?" Jason asked. "Your's is the one we've all been waiting for."

"Agreed," Neil said. "Why mirage dragon?"

"Stash is a mirage dragon," Humphrey said. A mouse poked its head out of Humphrey's chest pocket and Humphrey scratched its head.

"I kept him hidden through the trials because I didn't want to draw too much attention. Mirage dragons are rare, even for dragons, and I don't want anyone trying to kill me and take him."

"Well, let's see the new ability," Jason said.

Ability: [Attack of the Mirage Dragon]

- Transfigured from [Human] ability [Special Attack Affinity].
 - You are more likely to awaken special attacks than other ability types. Your special attacks have increased effect.
 - When you make special attacks, you can expend mana to create a short-lived, illusory double, replicating the attack. The illusion does not inflict damage or duplicate other effects from the attack but you can spend mana to switch-teleport with it, in the moment it is created. This is an illusion and teleport effect.
-

“What the hell kind of cheat ability is that?” Jason asked as they watched Humphrey and Sophie engage in some light sparring. Humphrey’s attacks were suited more for fighting monsters than people, which normally gave her a relatively easy time blocking or dodging them. Even just learning to use his deceptive new double attacks already made the difficulty skyrocket.

“That’s awful,” Sophie said once they were done. “The flexibility that adds to your attacks is just mad.”

“I think we can safely say who won the racial gift lottery,” Jason said, although he was quite happy with his own ability. The mini-map floating in his vision had green dots for his allies and yellow dots for other people. He hadn't encountered an enemy yet but expected them to show up as red.

Jason sighed.

“No, Clive. No, and I mean it.”

“This an incredible opportunity. All these people looking for rituals of awakening and you wouldn’t even have to do anything. I’ll do the rituals and you just have to cycle them through your party.”

Jason rubbed his temples.

“Clive, you’re not listening. Humphrey, please explain it to Clive.”

They had quietly occupied one of the guest-wing terraces, begging off their families to get some rest. The sun had gone down but the cloud palace lit up with internal illumination and they enjoyed the warm night air, reclined on a series of loungers. From below, the sounds of celebration rose up from where the adventurers had set up camp between the cloud palace and the town.

After weeks of constant danger, the sudden safety was like releasing a pressure valve. Most of them fell asleep until Clive started advocating for his plan to record every ability awakened with the reaper stones so many adventurers had received.

“Jason already drew more attention to his abilities than he probably should when we all advanced our racial abilities,” Humphrey said. “Getting people even more interested is a dangerous proposition.”

“It’s why Rufus, Gary and Farrah warned me to keep the outworlder thing under my hat,” Jason said. “What happens when someone shares your interest in my abilities, Clive, but they’re gold-rank and don’t care about my opinion? I get hauled-off in the night and you never see me again.”

“It just seems like a waste of potential,” Clive said.

“Before I came here,” Jason said, “wasting my potential was kind of my thing.”

“Sometimes you just have to accept what you get and let the rest go,” Sophie told Clive. Jason was deliberately keeping his eyes from where she languidly stretched out on the lounge, concerned they would fall out of his head.

“If you run around chasing the best possible result,” Neil told Clive, “you might miss out on the great thing you gave up to maintain the chase.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning that Jason isn’t going to bend on this and if you keep pushing, he’ll kick you out of the party until we’ve all done our awakening rituals.”

“So, you’re saying I should be happy with recording the abilities of our own team?” Clive asked, reluctance still thick in his voice.

“After that display the gift evolutions,” Neil said, “keeping Jason’s abilities to ourselves may be closing the gate after the heidel’s run off, at this point. Maybe compromise, Asano. Let Clive do the awakening rituals for our party, Cavendish’s party and maybe Prince Valdis’. It’s not like he isn’t already paying attention.”

Jason gave a groaning sigh.

“I can live with that,” he conceded.

“Great!” Clive said, erupting out of his chair. “I’ll go get things organised.”

“Hold your heidels, chief,” Jason said. “We should get ourselves sorted before we start rounding up anyone else.”

“He’s right,” Humphrey said. “If nothing else, we have some awakening stones to collect from Emir.”

“Then let’s go find him!” Clive said.

“Tomorrow,” Humphrey said firmly. “Tonight, we rest.”

Chapter 176:

Relief

On his return to the cloud palace, Emir's first action was securing the scythe. His second was seeking out Jason and his team on the balcony terrace and enjoying a light lunch.

"Join us," Jason said as Emir arrived.

"I'm a little busy right now," Emir said.

"Are you sure?" Jason asked. "We've got gold plum soufflé."

"Well," Emir said. "I suppose we can talk over lunch."

"So, have you come to give us some top-end awakening stones?"

"Actually, I've come to give you four hundred and nineteen time-displaced priests who came out of the archway very confused and asking for you by name."

"Oh, right," Jason said. "Shade actually came through on that. Are you really leaving them to me to deal with? I'd have thought you'd be all over those people and what they knew."

"Actually, yes," Emir admitted. "I have a historian on staff who practically had a fit when I told her about them. I think we'll end up thoroughly debriefing them, then turning them over to their various churches to deal with. Whatever we may think of certain religious organisations, right now, I don't see much of a better option."

"They may not all want to go back," Jason said. "I could see some of them being disillusioned by what they went through."

"Not everyone is as cavalier with the churches as you, Jason," Emir said. "If any of them do put their faith aside, you can coordinate with the Adventure Society to sort it out."

"I imagine they'll take it out of my hands," Jason said. "It sounds like more of a three-star adventurer problem, which is too difficult for simple old me with my solitary star."

"True," Emir said, earning him an affronted look from Jason. "And about those rewards, I'll have Constance bring you a list of the awakening stones we have. You can choose any five you like."

"What about the cloud palace?" Humphrey asked. "That was the reward that had all the adventurers salivating."

"Obviously there's only one cloud palace to be had," Clive said. "It's a bonded item, so you'll need to decide which of you it will be bonded to."

"That'll be Jason," Humphrey said. "He's the one that got the scythe, after all."

"We should at least talk about it," Jason said.

“We did,” Humphrey said. “We all agreed.”

Jason looked around at the team and they all nodded.

“If you don’t want it, I’m happy to take it off your hands,” Sophie said.

“No, that’s fine,” Jason said. “I’ll take it.”

They were able to choose five stones, which was one for each team member. A legendary stone was the nearest thing to actually selecting a specific power, which made picking from a selection of legendary stones an unparalleled luxury. Constance brought them a list of the stones in Emir’s supply, which turned out to be startlingly large.

Neil and Jason both selected awakening stones of the avatar, known for most often producing summoning powers and powerful buffing abilities. Humphrey selected an awakening stone of rebirth, hoping for a powerful recovery power. Sophie, on Constance’s advice, selected an awakening stone of the celestials. Clive chose an awakening stone of karma, the same as his confluence essence, although he would not be able to use it.

They waited in the guest wing lounge as Constance left and came back with a long wooden box, the top of which she slid off to reveal five awakening stones, sitting on velvet.

“We had three of these, originally,” Constance said as she handed the stone of the celestials to Sophie. “They were created from an outworlder’s ability, like Jason’s, and I’ve never heard of them appearing anywhere else. The only reason they appear in the Magic Society records at all is that we allowed the Magic Society to examine them.”

“So you don’t know what their power inclinations are?” Clive asked.

“The other two were both used by celestines,” Constance said. “In both cases, the abilities enhanced their natural racial gifts.”

Clive handed his stone to Sophie.

“It should pair well with your balance essence and give you something formidable,” he said.

Sophie looked down at the stones she was holding in each hand. Each one was valuable on a level she could barely conceive of. Even most essences would not fetch as high a price as these, should someone squander them on the open market. She looked up at Clive who placed his hand over her, closing her fingers as she tried to hand it back. He gave her a warm smile.

“This is just the beginning,” he told her. She looked around uncertainly but found supporting smiles all around. Even Jason looked uncharacteristically sincere, without his usual expression of thinking of a joke no one else knew about.

“So, whose stones to we use first?” she asked.

“Jason’s,” Clive said. “I want to see what those two reaper stones produce. Also, he’s faster, because he doesn’t need a ritual.”

“Actually, I do want to use one,” Jason said. “Shade said I should incorporate this into a ritual.”

Jason tossed an object to Clive, a square of obsidian with a scythe engraved in silver, along with writing he couldn’t read. Clive looked at it, then up at Jason.

Item: [Reaper Token] (transcendent rank, legendary)

??? (consumable, ???).

- Effect: ???
- Effect: ???

“This is an astral blessing token,” he said. “For the Reaper, right?”

“Yep,” Jason said.

“What’s an astral blessing token?” Sophie asked.

“Its something great astral beings give out to bestow blessings, as signs of approval,” Clive said. “They trigger racial gift evolutions, just like the one we all went through. I used one of these myself, back when I was Humphrey’s age.”

“So, it’s like those star seeds?” Neil asked, shrinking away.

“No,” Clive said. “The blessings are harmless. The great astral beings give them out for all kinds of reasons, to those that venerate them or that they approve of. Some astral beings have even given them out to those who work against their interests because they are enemies worthy of respect.”

“And you use them as part of an awakening ritual?” Jason asked, thinking of the other token in his possession. The one the goddess of knowledge claimed would send him home.

“Some you can,” Clive said. “They tend to arrange for specific abilities if you do. That’s something only transcendent beings like gods can arrange. Every token has an additional effect, and some can only be triggered in certain ways. If Shade told you to use it with an awakening ritual, it should probably be with one of the Reaper stones.”

“Agreed,” Jason said. “How did you get your token, Clive?”

“It just showed up one night while I was studying,” Clive said. “There was this patch of moonlight in my room, even though the curtains were closed, and there it was. My mentor knew what it was and helped me use it with my next awakening ritual.”

Clive frowned in thought.

“That’s one interesting point,” he said. “Your token came from your ability, right? A quest reward.”

“That’s right,” Jason said.

“That shouldn’t be possible,” Clive said. “Your quest system’s ability to produce items is just another loot power variant. It shouldn’t be able to produce an astral blessing token. Only great astral beings can do that.”

“Maybe I’m secretly a great astral being,” Jason said. “I could have knocked up a crappy body, chucked in some fake memories and shoved a chunk of my consciousness into it to get a mortal perspective. Or for laughs, whatever.”

Clive’s eyes went wide in horror as he stared at Jason.

“That... no... that can’t be... no... but... no. Wait... no... that can’t be right.”

“Mate, calm down,” Jason told him. “I’m not secretly the Reaper.”

“But, I mean, conceivably...”

“No,” Jason said firmly. “These beings can just make the tokens appear if they like, right? Surely the Reaper, having about a squillion times more power than me, could have tweaked my ability to produce it this one time. Just a reward for getting his magic farming tool.”

“Yeah,” Clive said, nodding to himself. “That makes more sense.”

“Exactly. Now, do you know how to incorporate this thing into an essence ritual?”

“Oh, Absolutely,” Clive said, perking up. “Let’s get into a ritual room and do this.”

Clive was as good as his word, setting up a more elaborate magic circle than he had for Sophie’s awakenings. Jason stood the middle, the awakening stone of the Reaper in one hand and the Reaper token in the other.

“Ready?” Clive asked him.

“Yeah,” Jason said.

“What are you hoping for?” Clive asked.

“Well, apparently Shade is looking for a new gig,” Jason said. “I thought he’d make an awesome familiar.”

“Seriously?”

“Why not? Colin’s great, don’t get me wrong, but the conversation isn’t exactly sparkling.”

Clive shook his head and conducted the ritual. It went as normal, aside from the Reaper token melding into his body along with the awakening stone, and felt to Jason no different to absorbing them normally.

-
- You have awakened the dark essence ability [Shadow of the Reaper]. You have awakened 4 of 5 dark essence abilities.

Ability: [Shadow of the Reaper] (Dark)

- Familiar (ritual).
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Summon a [Shadow of the Reaper] to serve as a familiar.

“That looks like a winner,” Jason said. “I think I might have actually done it?”

As the others read his ability through the party interface, Blue-grey light started shining from Jason’s body.

“As expected,” Clive said.

-
- [Reaper Token] has been consumed.

 - Outworlder racial ability [Mysterious Stranger] has evolved to [Dark Rider].

Ability: [Dark Rider]

- Transfigured from [Outworlder] ability [Mysterious Stranger].

- Language adaptation.
- Essence, awakening stone and skill-book absorption.
- Immunity to identification and tracking effects.
- Shadow-based familiars may take adopt the form of a mount appropriate to the environment.

“Oh, a mount power, sweet,” Jason said. “Now I don’t have to farm all that gold.”

Then he looked at the requirements for the summoning ritual his new familiar power would require.

[Shadow of the Reaper] summoning ritual material requirements:

- 343 [Dark Quintessence Gems (Iron)].
- 2401 [Iron Rank Spirit Coins].
- 500 grams of [Midnight Onyx Powder].
- 1 [Midnight Jade].
- 24 small, square [Night Stone] plates.

“Mat farming isn’t entirely off the table it seems.”

“What are you talking about?” Sophie asked.

“The ritual to summon my new familiar. It takes a bunch of stuff I don’t have.”

“It should have been the same for your first familiar, right?” Clive asked. “Even more costly, if anything. Your first familiar is an apocalypse beast, after all?”

“Did you just say apocalypse?” Neil asked.

“Don’t worry about that,” Jason said. “It’s fine.”

“Apocalypse?” Neil asked again.

“I said it’s fine. Tell him it’s fine, Clive.”

“He’s right,” Clive said. “Until he reaches diamond rank, it definitely won’t be able to wipe out an entire world’s worth of life.”

“WHAT?”

“Clive, I said to tell him it's fine, not anything about scouring the world of life, which Colin would never do.”

“He might,” Clive said.

“He wouldn’t eat the plants, would he?” Jason asked.

“Oh, you’re probably right,” Clive said. “Do you still have the book from the blood cult? It might be in that.”

“Yeah, Farrah gave it to me when she was done with it. Because of my familiar. Actually, the blood cult is why I had such an easy time summoning Colin. They took off with all the high-end goods but left behind a pile of iron-rank materials. And being a blood cult, there was plenty of iron-rank materials to knock out the ritual. When Rufus was splitting the loot he gave me a spare set in case something happened and I had to resummon the little guy.”

“You’ll have to do some shopping,” Humphrey said. “In the meantime, how about your other awakening stones?”

“Oh, yeah,” Jason said, rubbing his hands together, then plucked another awakening stone from his inventory. “Another Reaper stone. I’m running out of chances to get that necrotic affliction I’ve been after, and I think this is the one.”

After the ritual he used to absorb his last stone, quietly absorbing the next one seemed anticlimactic.

-
- You have awakened the dark essence ability [Hand of the Reaper]. You have awakened 5 of 5 dark essence abilities.
 - You have awakened all dark essence abilities. Linked attribute [Speed] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank dark essence ability.

Ability: [Hand of the Reaper] (Dark)

- Conjunction (disease).
- Cost: Low mana-per-second.
- Cooldown: None.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)
- Effect (iron): Conjure a highly flexible, semi-substantial shadow-arm that can extend or shrink. Conjured items can be conjured into the shadow hand. Can be used to make melee special attacks. Special attacks made using the arm inflict [Creeping Death] in addition to other effects.
- [Creeping Death] (damage-over-time, disease, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until the disease is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

A huge grin spread across Jason's face. The lack of a necrotic damage affliction in his repertoire of abilities been preying on his mind increasingly as his available slots diminished. The relief at closing the gap in his power set was like finally taking a wee after desperately holding it in for too long and he let out a contented sigh.

"That power sounds strange," Sophie said, reading the description. "It also sounds creepy. A flexible hand sneaking about?"

"It seems like it'll be versatile," Humphrey said. "You can use it to make special attacks, but also just increase your ability to reach. It's no telekinesis power but I imagine you'll get some use out of it."

"I'll give it a try," Jason said. He reached out with his arm, which transmuted into the same shadow-stuff his cloak was made of. It extended out to slip around Humphrey's ankle like a constrictor snake.

"I can use this in combat for more than just making attacks," Jason said and yanked back hard with the shadow arm. Humphrey didn't budge, Jason instead yanking himself off his feet and falling to an undignified heap.

"It doesn't seem to increase my strength at all," he said from the floor.

"You'll need to test it extensively to see what you can and can't do with it," Humphrey told him. "For now, move onto the next stone."

“Right,” Jason said. “I can knock out the last one and someone else can jump into the spotlight.”

He took out the last stone, the awakening stone of the avatar.

“It’s going to be a doom power,” Jason said. “Do you think it will be some super-hideous affliction?”

“I think it’s more likely to be a summoning power,” Clive said. “Maybe one that runs around, causing afflictions for you?”

“I already have Colin for that,” Jason said.

“Other than summons,” Clive said, “avatar stones are known for enhancement and transformation powers. If it’s from the doom essence, maybe it turns you into a blob of pustulant flesh that spurts gobbets of poisons from the sores all over your body.”

Everyone gave Clive a wary look.

“What?” Clive asked.

“That isn’t actually an option is it?” Jason asked.

“Sure it is,” Clive said encouragingly. “I’ve read a case study about someone with a very similar power. It was actually a fascinating case because the permanent nature of the transformation made it resistant to suppression collars.”

“Permanent?” Jason asked, his face wan.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” Neil said happily, giving Jason a pat on the back. “If it’s really bad we can push you around in a wheelbarrow or something.”

“I’m not going to be the one pushing it,” Sophie said.

“You’re his indentured servant,” Neil told her. “I think it has to be you.”

“The guy I read about was more or less humanoid,” Clive said, “so that shouldn’t be an issue.”

“More or less?” Jason repeated.

“He certainly had something that could pass as legs,” Clive said.

“Maybe I should find an awakening stone more special-attack oriented,” Jason said.

“Don’t let them talk you out of using such a precious stone,” Humphrey said. “I’m sure you’ll be fine. We would never push you around in a wheelbarrow.”

“Thanks,” Jason said gratefully.

“We’d have someone make a little magic cart,” Humphrey continued. “Probably with something to seal in the smell, because I have to imagine it would be bad.”

“Oh, it definitely would,” Clive said. “Instead of sweating, the guy secreted this oil that kept him cool and killed insects, but was apparently very pungent.”

“Alright, you all need to stop talking,” Jason said.

Chapter 177:

Glory

Despite the best efforts of his team to unnerve him, Jason used his final awakening stone, albeit with eyes closed and whispering to himself.

“Don’t turn into a blob, don’t turn into a blob, don’t turn into a blob...”

-
- You have awakened the doom essence ability [Avatar of Doom]. You have awakened 5 of 5 doom essence abilities.
 - You have awakened all doom essence abilities. Linked attribute [Spirit] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank doom essence ability.

Ability: [Avatar of Doom] (Doom)

- Familiar (ritual).
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: None.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): Summon an [Avatar of Doom] to serve as a familiar.

“Another familiar power,” Jason said. “I’m turning into a pet character. I don’t suppose anyone knows what an avatar of doom is?”

“It isn’t something I’ve heard of,” Clive said, pulling out his monster archive tablet. After looking through for a few moments, he shook his head.

“Not here,” he said. “You get that with summoned familiars quite a lot, though, seeing as they’re all beings from the deep astral. It’s an endless supply of bizarre and terrifying horrors.”

“We don’t know it’ll be terrifying,” Jason said.

“It’s called an avatar of doom,” Neil said. “I doubt it’s going to be a healer-type familiar.”

“That’s an option?” Jason asked. “Having your own personal healer?”

“My sister has one,” Humphrey said. “But she’s a summoning specialist, so she has one of just about everything.”

“Oh, bloody hell,” Jason said, looking over the summoning ritual requirements.

[Shadow of the Reaper] summoning ritual material requirements:

- 108 [Radiant Quintessence Gems (Iron)].
 - 108 [Void Quintessence Gems (Iron)].
 - 1296 [Iron Rank Spirit Coins].
-

“These ritual materials are awful,” Jason said. “Void and radiant quintessence?”

“Ouch,” Clive said. “That’s going to be worse than the other one.”

“Lucky we just got a haul of treasure, then,” Sophie said. “That plant quintessence might be common, but we have piles of the stuff, and it’s bronze-rank.”

“That’ll put a dent in the price,” Jason acknowledged.

“The problem will be sourcing the materials,” Clive said. “I know the Magic Society has some radiant quintessence, although it won’t part with it cheaply. I think the void quintessence will be your main obstacle. It’s actually harder to get at iron than it is at higher ranks.”

“We can worry about that later,” Jason said. “It’s someone else’s turn to use their stones.”

“Right,” Clive said. “I’ll set up a ritual while you all decide who goes next.”

“We still need to organise my stones,” Sophie said. “I’ll wait until later.”

“Sensible,” Humphrey said. “Would you like to go next, Neil?”

“Is there any chance of Neil turning into a blob monster?” Jason asked Clive hopefully.

Clive hummed thoughtfully as he used his power to draw out a ritual circle.

“If I recall correctly,” Clive said, “you have open spots in the Shield and growth essences, right, Neil? The avatar stone could have some blob-related results in the growth essence. As for the Reaper, stone, who knows?”

“That’s comforting,” Neil said. “I was more looking for another summon, or maybe a buff spell. A shield golem would be nice.”

“Shield golem?” Jason asked. “That actually does sound awesome. I hope you get that.”

Neil’s ritual of awakening went off without incident in Clive’s capable hands.

-
- You have awakened the growth essence ability [Hero's Moment]. You have awakened 5 of 5 growth essence abilities.
 - You have awakened all growth essence abilities. Linked attribute [Spirit] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank growth essence ability.

Ability: [Hero's Moment] (Growth)

- Spell (boon, recovery).
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: 24 hours.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): Bestow a powerful boon on an ally, increasing all attributes and resistances by a significant amount. They receive damage reduction, their maximum mana and stamina are increased and they gain ongoing mana and stamina recovery. They ignore the effects of rank-disparity. When this effect ends, they are temporarily debilitated, suffering the inverse of all previous effects.

“There’s that buff you were looking for,” Jason said. “That’ll turn Humphrey into a monster.”

“I think the more interesting application will be Neil’s summon,” Clive said. “We’ve barely tapped into what we can do with it. You may or may not remember that when heavily damaged, it undergoes a transformation based on what it was subjected to before the change. Imagine what it would get out of having that spell used on it.”

“That’s an interesting point,” Humphrey said. “One of our strategic thin spots is our summons. We have a few strategies build around Jason’s leech swarm, but mine and Neil’s summons have been rather underutilised. Once we add in Jason’s new familiars, we’ll have quite the selection of allies at our command.”

As Clive set up the next ritual, the others postulated Neil’s last ability.

“The only unawakened ability I have is from the shield essence,” Neil said. “What kind of ability will come from a stone associated with death?”

“Another one of your quick bubble-shields?” Jason guessed. “It could have retributive damage, like your burst shield ability.”

“What about a death wall?” Humphrey said. “I remember during the last monster surge I was up on the outer walls with my father. A swarming pack of margolls came pouring at us and one of my family members put up this sheet of energy. Every monster that went through it died on the spot.”

-
- You have awakened the shield essence ability [Reaper's Redoubt]. You have awakened 5 of 5 shield essence abilities.
 - You have awakened all shield essence abilities. Linked attribute [Power] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank shield essence ability.

Ability: [Reaper's Redoubt] (Shield)

- Spell (dimension).
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: 6 hours.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): Take allies into a dimensional space briefly while flooding the area with death energy, dealing disruptive-force damage, necrotic damage and inflicting [Creeping Death].
- [Creeping Death] (damage-over-time, disease, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until the disease is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

"I know I'm new at this whole adventurer thing," Sophie said, "but that ability sounds really strong, right?"

"That's the same affliction as my ability," Jason said. "Must be a favourite of the Reaper."

"The fact that it takes six hours before becoming available again suggests it certainly is strong," Humphrey said. "The other ability takes a whole day. Judgement of when to use your powers will be key, Neil."

"Nothing new there," Neil said.

"The utility of that new ability will depend on how close we have to be to Neil to be taken into the dimensional space," Humphrey assessed. "I don't think being left behind for those other effects would be a pleasant experience."

"It feels like I can take in anyone within about a dozen metres," Neil said. "I think we can work with that range."

Essence users all had an instinctive understanding of their abilities as the awakening stones imprinted them on the user's soul. Even without using them, there was an intrinsic understanding of an ability's properties. This was only ever hampered in unusual instances, like Jason and his shadow teleport.

Until he had broken through the mental block to give himself completely over to magic, Jason had been unable to make the shadow-jump work. Even then, however, he

had an understanding of how it should work. Neil's estimate of his new power's parameters was therefore considered trustworthy.

After Neil, they moved onto Humphrey. The awakening stone of the Reaper gave him a special attack, unsurprisingly for a human.

-
- You have awakened the magic essence ability [Spirit Reaper]. You have awakened 5 of 5 magic essence abilities.
 - You have awakened all magic essence abilities. Linked attribute [Spirit] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank magic essence ability.

Ability: [Spirit Reaper] (Magic)

- Special attack (melee, dimension, drain).
- Cost: Low mana and stamina.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Inflicts additional disruptive-force damage and drains mana. Has additional effect against incorporeal or semi-corporeal creatures.

"An attack specialised in fighting incorporeal opponents," Humphrey said. "I might have been disappointed if I hadn't just spent weeks fighting those vorger creatures. Magic weapons could affect them, but not well."

"Also, don't overlook the use of disruptive-force damage at breaking through magic defences," Neil said. "It can break down magical shields like mine much faster than normal."

They moved on to Humphrey's final stone. He had chosen an awakening stone of rebirth, hoping for a recovery power that would increase his staying power in an extended fight or let him run at full steam for longer in a short one. He had chosen it specifically, on the advice of his mother, she wanted him to avoid the flaw in her own ability set. Her powers were outrageously potent, but at a cost of rapidly consuming mana and stamina. In short bursts, she was close to invincible within her rank. Extended conflicts would leave her vulnerable, however; too drained to use her formidable abilities.

-
- You have awakened the might essence ability [Immortality]. You have awakened 5 of 5 might essence abilities.
 - You have awakened all might essence abilities. Linked attribute [Power] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank might essence ability.

Ability: [Immortality] (Might)

- Special ability (healing, recovery).
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: 24 hours.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): Instantly restore a large portion of health, mana and stamina. Amount restored is based on how depleted health, mana and stamina are when the ability is used.

“Seriously?” Jason asked. “I was happy with my shadow-arm power and this guy gets immortality?”

“In fairness,” Sophie said, “what would you say if asked whether you or Humphrey deserve the better power?”

“I’d say me, obviously,” Jason said. “I’ll lie through my teeth if there’s immortality in it.”

“You’ll lie through your teeth if there’s a halfway-decent lunch spread in it,” Neil told him.

“That’s fair,” Jason acknowledged cheerfully.

“Congratulations,” Clive said to Humphrey, slapping him on the arm. “You just acquired what may be the single most sought-after power in the world. Of course, it won’t actually bring you back from the dead until gold rank.”

“So, it’s real immortality?” Sophie asked.

“It’s a famous power, for obvious reasons,” Clive said. “The Magic Society has extensive records on it. There are various limitations on its power to bring back the dead, of course. It’s rumoured those limits are reduced or even eliminated at diamond rank, but I don’t have the authority to access those kinds of records.”

“Looks like Humphrey won the essence power lottery,” Jason said.

“You should remember that you’ve already come back from the dead,” Clive said to Jason, grabbing the attention of the group.

“It’s an outworlder thing,” Jason said dismissively. “Clive can explain while we go shopping.”

Jason turned to Sophie.

“You said Belinda was checking out the market, right?”

“That’s right,” Sophie said.

“Let’s go see if we can find her, then.”

A market had sprung up in the adventurer camp between the cloud palace and the nearby town. Adventurers had come from the trials with dimensional bags overflowing with loot and Greenstone’s brokers had anticipated exactly that. A series of tents, even bamboo buildings hastily erected with magic had formed an impromptu trade fair. Jason’s voice chat allowed them to contact Belinda and arrange a meeting place, but Constance intercepted Jason and the others on their way out of the cloud palace.

“Jason,” she said. “Emir would like to meet with you about the priests you liberated.”

“Oh,” he said, frowning. “Alright. You lot go ahead to the market and I’ll meet up with you later.”

Jason followed Constance to Emir’s tower-top office. It was the same as his previous visit, a flat space under a translucent dome, broken up by pools of water with plants growing from them. To Jason’s surprise, the head of the Adventure Society Inquiry team, Tabitha Gert was there. She gave Jason an assessing glance but said nothing, leaving with Constance via the elevating platform as soon as Jason arrived.

Emir was sitting behind a desk that, like his chair, was made of cloud-stuff. On the opposite side of the floor, a similar chair rose from the floor as Emir waved at Jason to join him. Jason sat down, glancing at the piles of paper in Emir’s desk.

“As it turns out,” Emir said, following Jason’s gaze, “no small part of treasure hunting is logistics. I signed up for the world travel and derring-do, yet somehow ended up buried in administration. I still need to present you the cloud palace but I want to carve out a proper amount of time for that. Such an unusual item requires a certain amount of instruction that I don’t intend to rush, and there are other concerns to be going on with.”

“You need something from me regarding these priests who escape the trials?” Jason asked. “You brought in their churches right?”

“Yes, although there are inevitable problems. One is with our old friend the church of Purity, of whom a full quarter of the priests belong.”

“Did Cal check out the Vane estate?” Jason asked.

“He did. From what he can tell, it was the regrouping point for the Builder cult members that scattered after escaping the desert astral space. They moved on afterwards, however.”

“Did he find enough to put the clamps on the church?”

“No,” Emir said. “They can just claim they hadn’t been doing anything with the site due to its isolation and that they knew nothing.”

“That’s a shame,” Jason said. “I almost feel bad handing these priests over to the church.”

“Not an issue, as it turns out,” Emir said. “The church has declared them tainted from their time in the astral space. I suspect they don’t want a bevy of fresh faces while they’re in the middle of conducting a huge conspiracy.”

“Don’t underestimate good old intolerant zeal,” Jason said.

“Either way,” Emir said, “we have a hundred confused, time-displaced, freshly excommunicated clergy.”

“How does that even work?” Jason asked. “Did Purity show up and take their essences?”

“Yes, those that had divine essences and awakening stones.”

“So what happens to them now?”

“Either they are received by another church or they replace their missing essences with regular ones. Fortunately, they’re only iron-rank, so the loss of their essences isn’t crippling. You saw the Interim Director leaving; she will be organising what to do with them.”

“She didn’t look eager to involve me in the process,” Jason said. “What do you need me for?”

“It seems that the being administering the trials informed them that you were the one who stood up for their release. They, and the church representatives who actually welcomed their lost people back, are rather keen on meeting you.”

Jason groaned. “Why did he have to go and tell them?”

“Don’t you want your moment of glory?” Emir asked with a smile.

“I’m more comfortable claiming unearned glory than getting the real thing,” Jason said. “All I did was ask the guy to let them go and he said yes. Hardly worth making a fuss over.”

“Consider it practice,” Emir said. “Adventurers become the heroes to many, and I doubt these are the last lives you’ll save.”

“I suppose,” Jason said. “Next time I save someone, though, I’m telling them my name is Humphrey.”

Emir laughed.

“Have you used your awakening stones yet?” Emir asked, changing the subject.

“Constance caught us just coming from a ritual room,” Jason said. “We need to sort out Sophie and Belinda’s stones and essences, plus I have two familiar summonings worth of materials to get. I’m not holding out hope of getting the quintessence I need locally.”

“I might be able to help with that,” Emir said. “Have your team refrain from selling their goods here. There’s going to be a flood of essences and awakening stones, dropping the price. Buy what you can here for cheap, and I’ll have Hester portal you somewhere you can sell your spoils at a tidy profit. You’ll also be able to access a larger market for what you need.”

“That would be amazing, thank you,” Jason said.

“Go meet with the church representatives and I’ll arrange things with Hester. Constance will be waiting to show you the way.”

“How are things going with you and Constance?” Jason asked. “She seems to be warming up around you.”

“Well, I think,” Emir said. “Our longer than expected stay here has everyone acting a little more casually. Something is holding her back, though, and I can’t for the life of me figure it out. I thought perhaps it was that she works for me, but that isn’t it.”

“Maybe it’s her rank,” Jason suggested. “She might not want to take that step in your relationship until you’re on the same level.”

“It’s an interesting idea,” Emir said.

“Have you tried asking her?” Jason asked.

“It’s not that easy,” Emir said. “We’ve been dancing around each other for a long time now. There’s a lot of heavy air in the space between us.”

“You shouldn’t be taking advice from me, anyway,” Jason said. “I’m barely older than your granddaughter. She used the skill books alright?”

“Oh yes,” Emir said. “She’d have trained through the night if I let her. I had to pry her away from Gabriel to make her go to bed. He dotes on her almost as much as I do.”

“I’ve been wondering about something,” Jason said. “I recall you having certain views on children, yet you have a granddaughter.”

“I had a son I never knew about,” Emir said. “The result of a youthful dalliance, before I even had my essences. The young lady in question never told me and I didn’t find out until he died, during the last monster surge.”

“I’m sorry,” Jason said.

“My son’s wife died with him, leaving only my granddaughter, Ketis. She went to live with her grandmother, my son’s mother, but she was not a woman of means. She knew who I was, but never sought me out for money. From what I hear, she raised my son into a

fine man. She only reached out for Ketis' sake. Her grandmother is well taken care of now, of course. Money, essences and enough monster cores to rank her up to bronze. Ketis will have her from some time yet."

"And Ketis herself will get the best of everything."

"Not everything," Emir said. "I would like for her to end up more like your friend Humphrey than your friend Thadwick."

"You know Thadwick? Oh, he was one of the ones the cult seeded."

"I don't know if you've heard," Emir said. "The cult has taken him again, in the time you've been gone."

"Why?" Jason asked. "No offence to the bloke, but he's not good to anyone for anything."

"The cult has been driven into hiding," Emir said. "Deeper hiding. We've managed to identify and curtail many of their operations in the city. They've been using Thadwick's knowledge of the considerable holdings of the Mercer family to make supply raids."

"Not even Thadwick deserves to have one of those things inside him," Jason said.

"Didn't he try to kill you?"

"Yeah, but he botched it, like everything he does. His family must be going wild, looking for him."

"Indeed they are," Emir said.

"Well, it's not my business," Jason said, getting up from his chair. "All this cult nonsense is above my pay grade and I have enough to be going on with. I think I'll go get this business with the priests over with."

Chapter 178: Display of Gratitude

The adventurer camp was divided into three areas. The first was the actual campsite, where opulent tents were set out for the prestigious visiting adventurers. The second was the market tents, plain but large, where Greenstone's brokers and the returned adventurers haggled over loot. The last camp was also the most modest, where the returned priests had been collected together.

Jason skirted the crowded market area, taking a moment to contact his team via his chat ability. He let them know he would be a while longer and passed on Emir's advice to not to sell their loot for cheap market prices. Once finished, he made his way through the tents toward the section where the priests and others liberated from the astral space were encamped. He knew that not all the people recovered had been actual clergy, many simply belonged to the divine militant factions of their various religions.

He was getting looks as he passed through the camp. Word had spread about his acquisition of the scythe, and those who had seen him hand it over recognised him and pointed him out to others. No one actually approached him until he was almost through the camp when an adventuring party stepped into his path.

"Something I can help you with, mate?" Jason asked the obvious leader.

"How did you get the scythe?" The man asked without introduction or preamble.

"You remember that archway that took us out, after the trials?"

"Yeah."

"It could also take you to the location of the real scythe."

"How?"

"Turns out it had a sexiness threshold. You're a good looking man, but..."

Jason ran a sensuous hand down his own body.

"...up against all this, you were bang out of luck."

"You mock me?"

"You don't have to tell me, mate; I'm the one doing it. Do you not know how mockery works?"

"Do you have any idea who I am?" the adventurer asked.

"My first thought was the lyrical gangster but I just don't think you've got the flows."

"What?"

The sun was behind the adventurers, leaving the man's shadow under Jason's feet. While he looked at Jason in anger and confusion, Jason dropped through the man's shadow like a hole had opened up under his feet. The adventurer looked around, wildly.

"Where did he go?"

Jason had teleported into a tent whose flap was open just enough for him to see the darkened space inside. It was an extremely large tent, like many others, with an opulently appointed interior. A thick rug covered the floor, while cushions were piled high into lounging furniture. There was also a trio of hammocks on stands, and a low table in the middle of the room. Shooting upright at the sudden intrusion was a trio of women, two of whom drew swords and pointed them with disturbingly steady hands at Jason's throat.

"Hello, ladies," Jason said, giving them a friendly grin as he raised his hands in surrender. "Sorry to barge in."

Body language told Jason that the third woman in the room was the one in charge. All three were celestines, although a different ethnicity than the silver-haired Sophie or the golden-haired locals. Their skin was caramel to Sophie's chocolate, while their eyes were sapphire orbs. The striking blue was matched by their hair, which spilled down like light passing through a waterfall.

Jason hoped the startled expression he knew was on his face was put down to the swords and not the mesmerising beauty of his captors. They were all garbed in wrap-style clothing that draped loosely, the muted colours flatteringly highlighting the vibrant colour of their hair and eyes.

"You're Jason Asano," the woman in charge said, looking him up and down. She tilted her head curiously to the side, as if looking at an animal that had wandered into her tent. Jason had the unsettling impression she was deciding if he was cute enough to be a pet or juicy enough to be food.

"Uh, yep," Jason said.

"What brings you into my tent?"

"Would you believe happenstance?" he ventured.

She made a dismissive gesture as she moved toward Jason and the other two backed away, resheathing their swords. He could see she knew exactly what effect the sultry gait of her lithe body had and exactly how to weaponise it. She walked right up into Jason's personal space, looking down as she was slightly taller than his slight frame. He dropped his surrendering hands to his side.

"What price are you going to pay for your rude intrusion, Mr Asano?"

"I suppose taking you to dinner is out of the question?"

The hands of the other two jerked back toward their swords, anger flashing on their faces. They were stilled by another dismissive gesture from their leader.

“You haven’t asked who I am,” she said. “Do you already know, or do you not care?”

“I’m pretty ignorant,” Jason said. “It probably wouldn’t mean anything if you told me.”

She gave him the smile of a snake that just found an unattended egg.

“You are as your reputation suggests, Mr Asano. Hiding behind the face of a fool.”

“What’s wrong with my face?” Jason asked, affronted. He gave it an exploratory poke with one of his fingers.

The woman laughed.

“I can hear an actual fool causing a commotion outside,” she said. “Is that on account of you?”

“I met a bloke who was curious about how I got the scythe,” Jason said. “His approach was a little rude.”

She raised an eyebrow.

“I recognise the irony,” Jason said.

“So, how did you do it?”

“I told the guy outside it was sexiness,” Jason said. “I recognise that trying that here would be insultingly implausible.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” she said.

“I noticed that too,” he said with a sly grin. “What’s your name?”

It was one of the two offsidiers that answered.

“You have the honour of addressing her royal highness...”

“I didn’t ask for a job title,” Jason interrupted. “I’m not big on nepotism, in any case. I asked for a name.”

“Does it matter?” the woman in front of Jason asked. “We haven’t decided if you get to leave this tent alive, yet.”

“Oh, I’m going to leave and I’ll be just fine,” Jason said.

“You’re confident.”

“No, but I’m good at faking it.”

He held a hand up and a plate piled high with red and white confectionary squares appeared in his hand.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“Gem berry and milk nut squares,” Jason said. “You asked about the price I would pay for barging in.”

His arm turned into shadow-stuff, bending around the woman and stretching out to set the plate on the table. One of her offsideers drew a sword and slashed at the shadow arm, the blade passing harmlessly through. Jason retracted his arm back and it returned to normal.

“Once you try those,” he said, “you’ll regret not taking me up on that dinner invitation.”

He made to leave and she didn't stop him, but she spoke up as he lifted the flap to leave.

“Mr Asano.”

“Jason’s fine,” he said, pausing at the entrance to the tent.

“Zara,” she said.

“Zara?”

“My name.”

Jason flashed her a grin.

“It’s been a genuine pleasure to meet you, Zara. Enjoy the slices.”

He left the tent, letting the flap drop down behind him.

“You should of let us cut him for his impudence,” one of Zara’s servants said.

“Nothing lethal. Just a lesson in respect for his betters.”

Zara let out a weary sigh. Her party members had been hand-picked by her father for loyalty over intelligence.

“You already tried that and it didn’t exactly accomplish anything,” Zara said. “That was Jason Asano. Cutting him is a quick path to becoming leech food.”

Jason arrived at the priest camp, keeping an eye out for the adventuring team he had annoyed along the way. He was quickly noticed and approached by a small delegation of church officials. He recognised the symbols of the Healer, Dominion and a few others. Conspicuously absent were Purity and Undeath, the two churches he had been told made up the bulk of the forces that had attacked the Order of the Reaper’s lake-bottom fortress.

As the church officials approached, the whole camp was suddenly inundated with a clashing maelstrom of overwhelming auras. One god was bad enough, but the manifestation of several at once, even with their auras tamped down to their minimum strength, threw the camp into chaos.

Some of the iron-rankers with less control of their own auras dropped to their knees, violently throwing up. Many of them lived entirely on spirit coins, consigning them to painful dry heaving. Most of the iron-rankers were fine, however, as the camp was a gathering of

exceptional adventurers. This included Jason, who retracted his own aura in tightly and let the divine auras wash around it like an island in a storm.

A handful of figures appeared before Jason. They looked like much like the church officials standing behind them but there was no mistaking the power radiating out of them. People were dropping to their knees like a religious Mexican wave before the unexpected appearance of their gods. Soon only Jason remained standing, right in front of them.

“And I thought I had a thing for melodrama,” he said.

One of the gods laughed. Each was wearing the robes of their own orders, complete with holy symbol. Jason recognised the one laughing as Dominion from his symbol. He appeared young and handsome, with a hint of perpetual disdain behind the eyes. His robes were purple and gold and he had a simple crown around his head. The outfit was troublingly similar to what the manifestation of Jason's evil future self had been wearing.

“You don't fail to disappoint,” Dominion said.

“I'm not sure how to take that, coming from you,” Jason said, getting another laugh from the god. Another God stepped forward, Jason recognising the symbol of the Healer.

“We wanted to give a display of our gratitude for returning our people, long lost to us,” Healer told Jason. “Astral spaces, not being truly of this world, exist beyond our influence. We understand you have complicated views regarding we gods and decided the best gift we could give you was to thank you in person. The simple fact of our having done so should help you establish your reputation as you advance your adventuring career.”

“Setting them loose wasn't exactly out of my way.”

“I think, perhaps, it was not so simple as you make out, but I shall say no more. We have given our thanks and shall take our leave.”

“No worries, bloke.”

The gods vanished, the sudden absence of their aura felling like ears popping under a pressure change. People started getting to their feet, all eyes on Jason. He looked around, then his shadow cloak formed around him and he teleported immediately through it, leaving the cloak to drift down for a moment before likewise vanishing.

Jason teleported rapidly through the camp, jumping from shadow to shadow. He finally reached the cloud palace, striding inside. Once through the door, he collapsed against the wall, drawing heaving breaths. It had taken everything he had to keep his cool in the face of not just one but a handful of gods, all while people looked on.

The sheer force of multiple divine presences had pressed down on him like the weight of the sky. For the first time he could feel his own soul. Even now, having escaped that inconceivable power, he could feel the pressure. Rather than lessen, he felt like was

descending into the ocean depths, every moment increasing the chance that the fragile vessel of his soul would collapse. By the time the pressure finally subsided, he was curled up on the floor of the cloud palace atrium, arms clutching his head.

New Title: [Godless Prophet]

- Your aura has been damaged through by the direct, concerted focus of multiple transcendent-level entities. The process of damage and recovery has refined the strength of your aura, increasing its suppressive force and resistance to suppression from higher-ranked auras.
 - Your aura signature has changed. An echo of transcendent power can be detected if your aura is examined by an aura sensing power of when projecting your aura.
-

Jason continued to lay on they floor, letting out exhausted, wheezing coughs.

“Jason?” Humphrey’s voice came through the party chat. “We all felt multiple divine auras and then we started hearing some strange things.”

“You should try it from my perspective,” Jason responded weakly. “You should all go ahead and shop without me. I think I’m going to have a lay down.”

“What happened?” Humphrey asked.

“I’ll tell you later,” Jason said. “Just spot me for anything Sophie and Belinda want to buy, alright?”

“I can do that,” Humphrey said.

In the guest wing lounge of the cloud palace, Sophie and Belinda were going over the awakening stones Sophie had chosen with Clive. They had obtained the essences for Belinda but had decided to leave those until Sophie's power set was completed. Although they had found several interesting essences during the trials, Belinda was adamant about the combination of three common essences she had already chosen. They had no trouble trading for the magic, trap and adept essences she wanted.

Sophie also had her remaining awakening stones sorted out. Clive had extensive knowledge of attempting to engineer power sets through stone choices, although he was the first to reiterate that he could make no promises.

Aside from the legendary awakening stones, her strongest acquisitions were a pair of epic awakening stones of the moment. Adventure Society representatives were offering good trades for restricted essences to take them out of the market and Sophie had traded a death essence for the two epic awakening stones.

“These really were a great trade,” Clive said for the third or fourth time since urging Sophie to take them in the first place. He had convinced her by explaining they were perfect for a skill-based power set. The abilities they were known to produce required precise timing but were incredibly impactful.

Rounding out Sophie’s selection were two uncommon stones picked out from the ones they found during the trials. Because Sophie’s power set was very skill-oriented, the awakening stone of preparation would hopefully give her an ability that acted as a failsafe when things inevitably went wrong. They hoped the awakening stone of the surge would bestow a buff power that would help in critical moments.

“The hallmark of a good high-skill adventurer is coming through in the critical moments,” Clive had explained. “If your abilities reflect this, you’ll find yourself far more effective. Be warned, though, that such abilities require skill, judgement and timing. Get them wrong and they may do more harm than good. To you, obviously. Doing harm to the other guy is kind of the point.”

“We should get everyone together to use the stones,” Sophie said. “Asano still hasn’t come out of his suite?”

“Not that I know of,” Clive said. “Having a bunch of gods turn up in front of you would be a straining experience for anyone.”

“You should go check on him,” Belinda said to Sophie.

“Why me?”

“He does own you.”

“He does not own me.”

“A lease is kind of like owning you.”

“It’s not a lease!”

“Still, you should be the one to...”

Sophie and Clive looked at the startled expression on Belinda’s face as she trailed off and followed her gaze to the terrace outside. Jason was wandering along, looking lost. More noticeably, he had a bushy moustache and no clothes whatsoever. Sophie, Belinda and Clive looked at each other in confusion, then went out to meet Jason.

“Uh, Jason,” Clive said. “You aren’t wearing any pants.”

“Fair point,” Jason said brightly.

“I think what Clive meant to ask was why,” Belinda said.

“The topic of this conversation is kind of my thing!” Jason said.

Sophie, Belinda and Clive shared another look.

“Asano,” Sophie said. “Is everything alright?”

“Biscuits!”

“Biscuits?” Sophie asked.

“Biscuits!”

Suddenly, Humphrey’s voice rumbled in their direction in an angry roar.

“STASH!”

Jason’s eyes went wide and he clambered onto the terrace rail, transforming into a puppy before leaping off, into the air. Humphrey then came pounding along the terrace at a run.

“WHAT DID I TELL YOU?” he bellowed before vaulting the rail in pursuit of his fleeing familiar.

Sophie, Belinda and Clive looked at each other one more time.

“Anyone else want a drink?” Clive asked.

“Yes please.”

“Absolutely.”

Chapter 179: The Person I Decided to Be

The only person who could open a guest suite door they were not attuned to was Emir. He did so when Jason didn't answer the chime and walked out to where Jason was staring, shell-shocked, out over the lake. For all that he reacted, Jason didn't even appear to notice Emir's arrival.

Emir joined Jason in leaning on the rail, enjoying the cool breeze sweeping over the water to refresh from the desert heat. Even as autumn turned to winter, the desert was unforgiving. More so than it should be this far south, by any reckoning Jason would recognise. Another difference between this world and his own.

"It's quite a thing, soul damage," Emir said.

Jason turned to look at him for the first time since he arrived.

"How did you know?" Jason asked.

"Your aura signature changed. I'm connected to the cloud palace and it didn't want to let you in because you don't match the aura imprint you gave it. I changed it to match your new one or you wouldn't be able to move around in here."

"The cloud palace can take my aura imprint when my Adventure Society badge can't?"

"Your badge can take your aura imprint just fine," Emir said. "It just can't be tracked. You should get your badge redone, by the way."

"My aura changed," Jason said. "Like the people with star seeds. Is everyone going to suspect me, now?"

"Not after what happened, with everyone watching. It would be strange if there wasn't some after-effect of getting up close and personal with gods like that. Gary was shaky for a while after meeting with just two and he's bronze rank. "You met six at iron rank? Damn right there's an impact."

"You said soul damage," Jason said.

"That's right. Do you know how magic healing works?"

"I'm more focused on astral magic," Jason said.

"There's actually some interesting crossover," Emir said. "Think of your soul like a plan, or maybe a memory of everything you are. What magical healing does is look at the difference between the plan and the reality and move one toward the other."

Jason's brow creased in thought as that information ticked over in his mind.

"That's how my soul was able to construct a new body when it arrived in this world," Jason said. "It was like a blueprint. And that's why I don't remember anything between disappearing in my world and arriving here. The soul has a backup copy of my brain-state, but no actual brain to think with in a space without physical reality."

"If you say so," Emir said. "I'm not really versed in the whole outworlder process."

"You should talk to Clive," Jason said.

"You should convince him to come and work for me."

"No chance."

"He's wasted as an adventurer."

"He was wasted not being one," Jason said. "He's gained so much confidence in the time I've known him. He needs to be an adventurer. At least for now."

"That's an unhelpfully good argument," Emir conceded.

"Tell me more about soul damage," Jason asked. To his surprise, Emir untucked his shirt and lifted it up to reveal a scar running horizontally across his chest and around his left side.

"I didn't think scars were possible with healing magic," Jason said.

"Normally they aren't," Emir said. "As I said, the soul is like a memory of how you should be, but some things change you forever. Some scars you carry on your soul."

"Your aura signature was changed once?" Jason asked.

"Nothing so drastic," Emir said. "My soul was marked. It wasn't enough to change my aura, but the events of that day are a part of who I am now. This scar represents a choice I once made about the I decided to be. It happens, sometimes. An injury marks a fundamental change in who you are and you carry it with you. Find any veteran adventurer, a real one who puts themselves out there, and you'll find they have scars like this. It takes something a bit more soul-shaking to not just mark your aura but change it, though."

"Soul shaking is right," Jason said. "I spent the whole night just trembling. It was like someone took my soul in their hand and could crush it like it was nothing. It's one thing to know a god has power beyond imagining. It's something else to feel it. To really feel it, all around you. It's like drowning."

"By all accounts, you didn't let it show," Emir said. "I did hear you left very quickly."

"Are you kidding?" Jason asked. "I thought I knew what vulnerable and exposed felt like but this was walking naked through the desert. Is this how people feel when their auras are suppressed?"

"I imagine what you experienced was similar, but worse," Emir said. "I know you handle having your aura suppressed strangely well, but for the rest of us, it feels like having your soul exposed for someone to see. I think yours actually was."

"The others must be worried," Jason said.

"We are all rather used to you taking everything in stride," Emir said. "I think you're being so rattled has taken away a little of your mystique. Also, the girls saw you naked."

"They what?"

"It seems Humphrey's familiar..."

"Oh, right," Jason said. "Stash has gotten it into his head that if he turns into me, he can make biscuits appear."

"He can't mimic your abilities, can he?"

"No," Jason said. "He can only take on the magic powers of things lower rank than him, which basically means lesser monsters. Sparkler worms, that kind of thing. Otherwise, it's just the normal, physical properties of the things he turns into. Claws, flippers, wings; that kind of thing."

"So, once he reaches bronze, he could mimic an iron-rank adventurer?"

"That's the theory," Jason said. "As Clive points out, there isn't a large sample size for mirage dragon familiars. There's actually more records of apocalypse beasts. A lot of them are swarms, like Colin. Helps cover ground to get that apocalypse going, I guess."

"I can't believe you named an apocalypse beast Colin."

"He's a good boy. Girl. Leeches can switch it about."

Suddenly Jason started laughing.

"What is it?" Emir asked.

"Back in my world," Jason said, "there are certain sections of society that think transgender people will bring about the end of the world. Colin's a transgender person that actually could, which I have to imagine would change their perspective on the issue. Probably not in a good way, though."

"You are a very strange man," Emir said. "I don't envy the gods having rummaged about inside your soul. I suspect it's very twisty."

"That may be the single rudest thing anyone has even said to me."

"Really?"

"Yeah," Jason said. "Thadwick tried to kill me and this actually feels worse. Probably because you aren't an idiot trying to salvage a bad plan with a worse overreaction."

"Did you really accuse a group of gods of being melodramatic?"

"Probably," Jason said. "It's all bit of a blur, to be honest."

“Well, your team is waiting to hear that you’re alright,” Emir said. “I believe Miss Wexler has a full set of awakening stones ready to use.”

“I should get to it, then. They’re probably sick of waiting.”

“I think you’re underestimating the degree to which they support you,” Emir said. “You’ll find them in the guest wing lounge.”

“So, it ultimately strengthened your aura?” Clive asked as the team walked through the cloud palace, in the direction of a ritual room.

“I think so,” Jason said. “I’ve been wondering if that was their intention or if I’m just so weak it never occurred to them.”

“I think it would be wise not try and guess a god’s motivation,” Humphrey said. “These are beings of unimaginable power, with experience longer than history and a perspective beyond our comprehension.”

“Agreed,” Sophie said. “I know you can’t stop yourself from poking a hornet’s nest, Asano, but at least pick hornets that can’t strike you down with a bolt from the heavens.”

They reached the ritual room and Clive started setting up.

“What do you think?” Belinda asked Sophie. “Start with the most common stones and work our way up to the good stuff?”

“Sounds good,” Sophie said.

Clive had been storing Sophie’s awakening stones and sat them on a shelf on the wall. Sophie went over as Clive started setting up the ritual. In a rare display of nervous fussing, Sophie went over and set them out neatly in a line until Clive announced he was ready. She grabbed the first stone and marched into the ritual circle he had drawn, and held up the uncommon-rarity awakening stone of preparation in her hand as Clive completed the ritual.

-
- You have awakened the swift essence ability [Alacrity's Reward]. You have awakened 4 of 5 swift essence abilities.

Ability: [Alacrity's Reward] (Swift)

- Special Ability (holy).
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Accumulate instances of [Blessing of Anticipation] over time, up to an instance threshold determined by the [Spirit] attribute. Rate of instance acquisition is increased proportionally with speed of movement.

- [Blessing of Anticipation] (boon, holy, stacking): Consume instances to negate an amount of incoming damage per instance consumed. Additional instances can be accumulated.

"That's a winner," Jason said.

"Exactly what we were looking for from the stone of anticipation," Clive said with satisfaction. "Something to compensate when skill doesn't work out. We couldn't ask for a better start."

He started setting up the next ritual.

"The next three stones are all designed to give you strong abilities that you can use at the right moment to critical effect," he said as he worked. "We'll start with the awakening stone of the surge."

-
- You have awakened the wind essence ability [Wind Wave]. You have awakened 4 of 5 wind essence abilities.

Ability: [Wind Wave] (Wind)

- Special Ability (movement).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 6 seconds.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Produce a powerful blast of air that can push away enemies and physical projectiles. Can be used to launch into the air or move rapidly while already airborne.

"I'm not sure that's exactly what we were after," Clive said.

Sophie raised an arm at Jason, whose eyes went wide as the air of the ritual room kicked into a gale and he was slammed into the mercifully soft cloud palace wall. The gust settled as quickly as it roared up, leaving behind an empty silence.

“I like it,” Sophie said.

“I’m not a fan,” Jason groaned as he pushed himself to his feet.

“This next awakening stone should be a good one,” Clive said. “Awakening stone of the moment.”

Sophie walked over to take the next stone as Clive set up the next ritual circle. His ability to draw them in their with his power, along with balancing out the ambient magic, saved immense amounts of time when going through many rituals in sequence.

-
- You have awakened the swift essence ability [Eternal Moment]. You have awakened 5 of 5 swift essence abilities.
 - You have awakened all swift essence abilities. Linked attribute [Speed] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank swift essence ability.

Ability: [Eternal moment] (Swift)

- Special Ability.
- Cost: Extreme mana-per-second and stamina-per-second.
- Cooldown: None.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): Operate at a highly accelerated speed for one second of actual time, which is extended in subjective time.

“It lets you move fast,” Jason said. “I guess the question is how fas... argh!”

Sophie had vanished, reappearing a moment later behind him, driving a fist into his lower back. From her perspective, the world had slowed to a barely perceptible crawl.

“Bloody hell,” Jason exclaimed as he lay on the ground, clutching his back. “What was that for?”

“I had to test the ability,” she said.

“Like that?” he asked, pulling himself to his feet.

“If you don’t like it,” Sophie said, “go complain to your god friends.”

“We’re more like work acquaintances,” Jason said. “We generally stay out of each other’s way unless something comes up in the course of our normal employment.”

“Did you just call the god of Dominion a work acquaintance?” Neil asked.

"I don't think he's someone I'd get after-work drinks with," Jason said. "I bet he'd cause a lot of trouble."

"My mother has the exact same power," Humphrey said to Sophie, getting the subject back on track.

"Rufus has one that's quite similar, too," Jason said.

While the others messed about, Clive set up the next ritual.

-
- You have awakened the balance essence ability [Moment of Oneness]. You have awakened 3 of 5 balance essence abilities.

Ability: [Moment of Oneness] (Balance)

- Special Ability (movement).
- Cost: Extreme mana-per-second.
- Cooldown: 2 minutes.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Become immune to all damage and afflictions for 1 second. The next melee attack within four seconds inflicts all damage and afflictions on the struck enemy. If no enemies attack, the damage and conditions are suffered retroactively.

"I'm going to need a volunteer," Sophie said after reading the power.

"I think it's your turn Hump," Jason said.

"Someone with afflictions would be best," Sophie added.

"Oh, come on," Jason said, walking up to Sophie. "What did I do?"

"How do you know the Hurricane Princess?" Humphrey asked.

"The who?" Jason asked. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Zara Rimoros," Humphrey said.

"Oh, Zara," Jason said brightly. Looking at Humphrey, he didn't notice the distasteful expression on Sophie's face. Belinda did, hiding a smile behind her hand.

"How did you know I know her?" Jason asked Humphrey.

"She came by last night, while you were... still in seclusion," Humphrey explained. "I think she wanted to check on you."

"Really," Jason said rubbing his chin thoughtfully as an intrigued smile crossed his face.

"Back to the task at hand, Asano," Sophie said. "You can moon over some girl later."

"Jealous?" he asked with a teasing voice as he turned around, spotting neither Belinda's wince nor Sophie's fist, ramming into his gut. With an expression mixing confusion and pain, he slumped to the floor.

“Why?” he asked between wheezing breaths from the ground. “Aren’t I meant to hit you to test that power?”

“Sorry,” Sophie said. “New ability. I’m still figuring out how it works.”

Chapter 180: You Have Friends to Help You

In the ritual room, the group continued to watch as Sophie went through her awakening rituals. She had three unawakened abilities left, one from the wind essence and two from the balance, along with three legendary awakening stones to use on them. She decided to save the Reaper stone for last, leaving the awakening stone of the celestials that Constance had suggested and the stone of karma that Clive picked out. She started with the stone of the celestials.

-
- You have awakened the wind essence ability [Child of the Celestial Wind]. You have awakened 5 of 5 wind essence abilities.
 - You have awakened all wind essence abilities. Linked attribute [Power] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank wind essence ability.

Ability: [Child of the Celestial Wind] (Wind)

- Special Ability (dimension, holy).
- Cost: None
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Your celestine racial powers have increased effect. You gain damage reduction to disruptive-force damage.

“What are the celestine racial powers?” Neil asked. “I know you have a utility power aptitude and can use ongoing abilities for less mana. That one’s your ability that evolved, right?”

“Yes,” Sophie said. “We also recover mana more quickly, we’re faster and have astral and holy affinities.”

“What does holy do, other than improve holy abilities?” Neil asked.

“It increases the effect of healing magic and holy boons used on me.”

“Oh, that’s nice,” Neil said. “Those are abilities you want to have increased.”

They moved into the awakening stone of karma.

-
- You have awakened the balance essence ability [Karmic Warrior]. You have awakened 4 of 5 balance essence abilities.

Ability: [Karmic Warrior] (Balance)

- Special Ability (holy).
- Cost: None
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Gain an instance of [Agent of Karma] when subjected to damage or any harmful effect, even if the damage and/or effect was wholly negated.

- [Agent of Karma] (boon, holy, stacking): The [Power] and [Spirit] attributes are temporarily increased by a small amount. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

“So basically,” Jason said, “Whenever you take damage, even when you negate that damage with your cheesy powers, you get stronger, tougher and your magical abilities get stronger get more powerful.”

“The spirit attribute actually has several functions,” Clive said. “Obviously, affecting the potency of essence abilities is the important one, but don't overlook its impact on our perception. As our spirit attributes move past bronze rank, our senses will go beyond what they are now. Colours, sounds and smells to which we were oblivious will suddenly be made plain to us.”

“So, you can move so fast it amounts to stopping time, become immune to damage, then heap all the damage you should have taken onto the other guy,” Jason said. “Now you have another overpowered ability. Humphrey got bloody immortality, and I got stretchy arms? Not even arms. One stretchy arm.”

“You can switch-up which arm it is, though,” Belinda said. “There's that.”

The group laughed at the flat look Jason gave her.

“We might be little more sympathetic,” Neil said, “if your powers hadn't killed a carnivorous plant the size of a small city.”

“It wasn't just me,” Jason said. “There were twenty-five other people involved in that.”

“Asano, we would have all been left sitting around with nothing to do if we didn't have you there,” Sophie said. “Stop whining.”

“I guess that's fair,” Jason conceded.

“Sophie, that new ability makes you rather like a defensive version of Jason,” Humphrey pointed out. “You don't have any explosive attack powers but now the longer a

fight goes on, the more dangerous you become. Increasing your power attribute will obviously increase your physical strength and the increase in spirit will affect the additional damage your powers add to your even your normal attacks. That will eventually add up to every one of your strikes having the kind of strength the rest of us only with a special attack. And we all know how quickly you can attack.”

“We still have one more ability to awaken,” Clive reminded them as he finished setting up for the final ritual.

“Did you hear what people were getting from Reaper stones, while you were in the market?” Jason asked.

“Clive veered off quite early to go ask around while the rest of us were selling loot,” Neil said. “Did you actually get people to tell you, Clive?”

“Kind of,” Clive said. “I found the Magic Society contingent and organised cheap awakening rituals for anyone who let us record their abilities.”

“I saw that,” Neil said. “You organised that?”

“I’m still a Magic Society official,” Clive said, “even if Lucian Lamprey did effectively strip me of all responsibility.”

“I’d like to kick that guy’s insides out once day,” Sophie said.

“Was this because of me?” Jason asked unhappily.

“He doesn’t like that I work with you,” Clive said. “It worked out, though, since It left me more free for adventuring and research. All his punishment actually did was free me from a bunch of administering duties.”

Jason frowned, knowing that it had not been the windfall Clive was making out.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“I told you, it’s fine,” Clive said. “Getting back on topic, I did manage to find out about a lot of powers coming from the Reaper stones. The most common, from what I could gather, are aggressive utility powers,” Clive said as he continued to work. “There’s quite a lot of conjuration powers, mostly weapons but also stranger things, like Jason’s arm conjuration. They all seem to incorporate offensive aspects, though, like the affliction Jason’s shadow arm delivers.”

“I’d like something impactful that I can open up a fight with,” Sophie said. “Something to put the enemy onto the back foot.”

“I’m not sure that’s on the table,” Clive said. “From the people I talked to, the Reaper stones tend to give out powers more in Jason’s wheelhouse. Slow, inevitable death.”

Speculation turned to anticipation as Clive finished the ritual and carried it out.

-
- You have awakened the balance essence ability [Deny the Reaper]. You have awakened 5 of 5 balance essence abilities.
 - You have awakened all balance essence abilities. Linked attribute [Recovery] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank balance essence ability.

Ability: [Deny the Reaper] (Balance)

- Special Attack (counter-execute, healing).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): Target enemy suffers a small amount of transcendent damage and you are healed for a small amount. As a counter-execute effect, the damage and healing scale exponentially with your own level of injury.

“Counter-execute?” Jason said. “That’s a new one to me.”

“You generally see it in defensive power sets,” Clive said. “They are generally more powerful than other abilities, but only if you use them when things are going badly. Usually, they have some combination of damage reduction, healing, retribution damage or health drain.”

“My immortality power is something of a false counter-execute,” Humphrey said. “It’s unlikely to scale as well Sophie’s new power but it can also scale off low stamina and mana, and will be more useful without having to be beaten down first.”

“Thought that ability scaled, like this one,” Neil said.

“Yes, but it doesn’t have to be with damage,” Humphrey said. “If I’m just low on mana, for example, it will top my mana up well without doing much for my health and stamina.”

“So it’s more versatile,” Jason said. “Stupid OP power. I bet your Mum’s happy, though.”

“Actually, she was ecstatic,” Humphrey said. “I’ve never seen her like that.”

“Of course she was,” Jason said. “A mother just found out her child was immortal.”

“I’m not actually immortal.”

“It is still a powerful survival skill,” Clive said. “This one of Sophie’s is not to be underestimated, however. The chance to bring a fight going badly back to even ground fits into the classic balance essence mode. Balance is quite popular because it has abilities like this that can pull you through rough situations.”

“I wanted an attack for a start of the fight, not the end,” Sophie said.

“Look at it this way,” Humphrey said. “Would you prefer a big, splashy entrance that may or may not do you any good, or something you can rely on when things go wrong.”

Sophie considered Humphrey’s words, nodding to herself.

“I guess you’re right,” she said. “Big attacks are kind of your area, anyway.”

“Plus, transcendent damage,” Clive said. “That’s as reliable as it gets, plus incredibly rare at iron rank. You only see it on conditional powers, like executes, or when the damage is negligible. Both of which are demonstrated by Jason’s abilities.”

“That leaves you,” Sophie said, turning to Belinda. “Ready to become an essence user.”

“Are you kidding?” Belinda asked. “I can’t wait for Jason to complain about how great my powers are.”

“What?” Jason asked.

“You can be a bit of a whiner,” Neil told him.

“I’m not a whiner,” Jason said. “I’m just open with my feelings. I’m a delicate flower.”

“The kind of flower that’s hard to eradicate, even when you try to get rid of it,” Neil said. “Is there a word for that?”

“You’re calling me a weed?” Jason asked. “That’s very rude.”

“You said I was fat!”

“You are objectively hefty for an elf.”

“I’m well built.”

“Like a fancy cake,” Jason said. “But I imagine you know all about cake, given how many you must have eaten to get like that.”

“I’m not the only elf that looks like this, you know.”

“You mean Lucian Lamprey? He’s not a great role model. Even putting aside the whole evil sleazebag thing, the guy looks like someone sucked the air out of a bag of nuts.”

As Jason and Neil continued to bicker, Clive went to work setting up Belinda’s first essence ritual. It was more elaborate and involved than a ritual of awakening, but otherwise quite similar. Soon, Belinda was standing in the middle of a magic diagram, a magic essence held nervously in her hands.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” Sophie said. “You saw me go through this.”

“Trust me,” Clive said. “I’ve done this dozens of times. Probably hundreds.”

“What if I get a crap power?” Belinda asked.

“My mother says there is no such thing as a bad power,” Humphrey said. “Just a bad essence user who doesn’t know what to do with it.”

“Everyone here knows how smart and resourceful you are,” Jason told her. “If you get a basic attack ability, that's a reliable power you can count on when things are too hectic to set up a clever plan. If you get something more esoteric, you can be innovative with it and really show what you're capable of. Either way, I know you'll be able to make the most of it.”

Belinda nodded.

“Thanks,” she told them.

“If all your powers are crap, though,” Jason added casually, “we're not letting you on the team.”

He yelped as Sophie thumped him on the arm.

“What was that for?” he asked.

“What was that for?” Sophie echoed incredulously. “If I had a suppression collar I'd put it on you and throw you off the highest tower in this whole damn palace!”

“I'm kind of in the middle of something here,” Belinda interjected.

“Sorry,” Jason said.

Clive conducted the ritual, the essence in Belinda's hands dissolving into a nebula-like cloud that floated around her before drifting gently into her body.

-
- You have absorbed [Magic Essence]. You have absorbed 1 of 4 essences.
 - Progress to iron rank: 25% (1/4 essences).
 - [Magic Essence] has bonded to your [Spirit] attribute, changing your [Spirit] from normal to [Iron 0]. Master all magic essence abilities to increase your [Spirit] attribute.
 - You have awakened the magic essence ability [Bag of Tricks]. You have awakened 1 of 5 magic essence abilities.

Ability: [Bag of Tricks] (Magic)

- Special Ability (dimension).
 - Cost: None
 - Cooldown: None.
 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).
 - Effect (iron): You have a personal, dimensional storage space. You may equip any item in your storage space directly onto your person or unequip anything on your person directly to your storage space.
-

“A dimensional space as your first ability,” Neil said. “Not even from some high-end stone; you got it straight from the essence. It looks like a convenient one, too. None of this conjuring up a cupboard or whatever.”

“We have a lot of storage spaces in this team,” Clive said. “We’re lucky, in that regard.”

Blue-grey light started shining from within Belinda.

“Here we go,” Clive said.

-
- Human racial ability [Essence Gift] has evolved to [Adventurer’s Tools].

Ability: [Adventurer’s Tools]

- Transfigured from [Human] ability [Essence Gift].
- Active ability (conjuration). Conjure basic, non-magical objects.

Sophie and Belinda had already decided just to do Belinda’s essences before taking their shopping trip to sell off their loot in a market not flooded with essences and awakening stones. They already had some stones picked out but were also waiting to see what her first powers produced. Normally, they would have only awakened around half of her powers right away, as had been the case with the rest of the team. Belinda was already behind the curve compared to the rest of the team, so they instead decided to do them all, after coming back from their shopping trip.

In the meantime, they moved on to the next essence.

-
- You have absorbed [Trap Essence]. You have absorbed 2 of 4 essences.
 - Progress to iron rank: 50% (2/4 essences).
 - [Trap Essence] has bonded to your [Power] attribute, changing your [Power] from normal to [Iron 0]. Master all trap essence abilities to increase your [Power] attribute.
 - You have awakened the trap essence ability [Bait and Switch]. You have awakened 1 of 5 trap essence abilities.

Ability: [Bait and Switch] (Trap)

- Special Ability (dimension, illusion).
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 1 minute.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).

- **Effect (iron):** Teleport self or nearby ally to a nearby location. The subject is rendered invisible for a brief period, leaving behind a lifelike illusion. The illusion has no substance or aura.
-

“An escape power,” Clive said. “The mana cost and use-interval for a power like that are quite large because you can use it on other people. That’s a valuable power.”
Belinda’s next racial gift evolution soon triggered.

- **Human racial ability [Essence Gift] has evolved to [The Price of Power].**

Ability: [The Price of Power]

- **Transfigured from [Human] ability [Essence Gift].**
 - **Active ability (spell, curse). The subject of this ability suffers disruptive-force damage when expending mana, proportional to the amount of mana consumed.**
-

“That’s interesting,” Clive said. “Active racial gifts are rare, especially one you can use on other people.”

“How is that a trap power?” Sophie asked.

“It turns a person’s own mana into a trap,” Neil said. “It’s a nasty ability.”

“I’m glad,” Belinda said. “The first one wasn’t great. Useful, don’t get me wrong, but a bit underwhelming.”

“Underwhelming?” Jason said. “That ability to conjure tools is the most pure-blood adventuring power I’ve ever seen. I could empty half my storage space if I had that power.”

“He really could,” Humphrey said.

“A will admit, I’ve been carrying around some useful goods as well,” Clive said.
“Because I had ropes with me, Neil and I have multiple growth items, now.”

“Still two essences to go,” Clive said. “I’ll set up the next ritual.”

“Actually, could we take a break?” Belinda asked. “This is kind of intense and I could use a rest.”

“Good idea,” Jason said. “We can all go up to my suite and I’ll put on some lunch.”

As everyone shuffled out of the ritual room, Clive asked Sophie and Belinda to stay behind a moment to discuss an issue with their new abilities.

“Is there a problem with our abilities?” Sophie asked after the others were gone.

“This isn’t really about your abilities,” Clive said. “This is about Jason.”

“What about him?” Sophie asked.

“I don’t like the way you were attacking him,” Clive said.

“Seriously?” Sophie asked. “It hit him ten times harder when we spar.”

“But you weren’t sparring.”

“You think he couldn’t have stopped me?”

“Jason’s judgement is compromised when it comes to you,” Clive said. “He’s wary of his power over you and the men who had power over you in the past. Because of that, he lets you get away with things he wouldn’t tolerate from anyone else. Don’t forget, he just went through something incredibly affecting.”

“He seemed normal to me,” Belinda said.

“Exactly,” Sophie agreed. “You saw him. He’s fine.”

Clive gave them a sad smile. “You never met Farrah, but when Jason and I started adventuring together, she asked me to look out for him. To make sure he actually was fine and didn’t just seem that way. He’s good at hiding when he’s overwhelmed.”

“That’s crap,” Sophie said. “He’s just one of those guys who takes it all in stride. Nothing really affects people like that.”

“People like that don’t exist,” Clive said. “Jason may not have been through all the things you have but he’s had his own challenges. He’s more vulnerable than he seems.”

Sophie scowled while Belinda looked at her, thoughtfully.

“Maybe we can tone it back a little,” she said.

“You mean I can,” Sophie said.

“Yeah, Soph,” Belinda said. “I mean you.”

They reconvened in the ritual room after lunch. Sophie was subdued, her scowl replaced with unhappy, thoughtful frowns as she shot glances in Jason’s direction. Jason moved over to Clive as he drew the circle for the next ritual.

“What did you do?” Jason asked quietly.

“I didn’t like the way she was treating you.”

“She needed that,” Jason said. “To know that she really is free and wouldn’t be pushed back down for acting against the man with the power over her.”

“You think that was a healthy expression of freedom?” Clive asked.

“Of course not,” Jason said. “But it was a start.”

“And what about what you need?” Clive asked. “You might be putting a good face on it but I know what happens to people who get that close to that many gods. I’ve read papers on it. You can’t tell me you’re fine when I know you were shaken to the very soul. Literally.”

“It’s fine,” Jason said.

“The way she was treating you isn’t fine,” Clive said. “Neil and Humphrey might think she’s crabby about some other girl but they’re teenagers and don’t know any better.”

“Wexler’s damaged,” Jason said. “We need to give her some leeway.”

“Trauma is not an excuse to hurt other people,” Clive said. “Isn’t the whole point for her to take responsibility for her own behaviour? This is not how you work through your problems.”

“You can’t fix everything at once, Clive. You take the wins you can get.”

“You aren’t a reliable judge when it comes to her,” Clive said. “You’re so scared of abusing the power in that indenture contract that you won’t act when you should,” Clive said. “But that’s alright. You have friends to help you. And so does she. Let us keep both of you walking in straight lines.”

Jason glanced over at Sophie, then nodded.

“Alright, Clive,” Jason said. “Thanks, mate.”

Chapter 181:

Blob Body

Clive performed the next essence ritual for Belinda.

-
- You have absorbed [Adept Essence]. You have absorbed 3 of 4 essences.
 - Progress to iron rank: 75% (3/4 essences).
 - [Adept Essence] has bonded to your [Speed] attribute, changing your [Speed] from normal to [Iron 0]. Master all adept essence abilities to increase your [Speed] attribute.
 - You have awakened the adept essence ability [Blessing of Readiness]. You have awakened 1 of 5 adept essence abilities.

Ability: [Blessing of Readiness] (Adept)

- Spell (recovery).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: Varies.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): This spell can only affect an ally and not yourself. The cooldown of the next ability used by the target is reduced by up to one minute. The cooldown of this ability is equal to the time taken from the cooldown of the target ability.

“Being able to use a key ability twice in quick succession could be very domineering,” Humphrey said. “That’s a strong power.”

Now used to it, they waited for the blue-grey light signalling a racial gift evolution.

-
- Human racial ability [Essence Gift] has evolved to [Quick Learner].

Ability: [Quick Learner]

- Transfigured from [Human] ability [Essence Gift].
- You may use skill books for which you meet the requirements.

“Oh, no.” Belinda said as her shoulders slumped.

“Great,” Sophie said. “You can finally start learning some of those skills you missed out on.”

“I didn’t miss out, Sophie. I don’t want to learn how to kick people.”

“You’re an adventurer, now.”

“And I intend to stand at the back,” Belinda said. “Look at the power I just got. It’s literally designed to have someone else do the kicking.”

“It never hurts to have some combat skills to fall back on,” Humphrey said.

“Adventurers who assume everything will go the way they want die very quickly.”

“A skill book doesn’t take long to use,” Jason said. “It’s kind of the whole point. It doesn’t have to be fighting. You could really expand your magical knowledge.”

“She already has magical knowledge,” Sophie said. “What she needs is combat skills, and we just so happened to get some rather good ones. Obviously she needs to train to make sure she absorbs all that knowledge properly,” Sophie said. “Asano, you said Rufus Remore can supply training like that, right?”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “He trained me that way.”

“He did?” Sophie asked, casting a sceptical eye over Jason. “I suppose he did what he could with what he had.”

“Oh, nice,” Jason said with exaggerated offence as the rest of the team laughed.

They had only been speaking a few moments when an ephemeral cube floated out of Belinda’s chest, followed by a second and a third. They hovered in front of her, spiralling around one another until they came together to merge into a single cube. It swirled with muted colours that formed ghostly shapes that were almost recognisable before fading into the background again.

“That’s your confluence essence,” Clive said with reverence.

“What do I do?” Belinda asked.

“Reach out and take it,” Clive said.

Hesitantly, Belinda reached out and touched the awakening stone. It dissolved into smoke that writhed around her before sinking into her body.

-
- You have absorbed [Charlatan Essence]. You have absorbed 4 of 4 essences.
 - Progress to iron rank: 100% (4/4 essences).

 - [Charlatan Essence] has bonded to your [Recovery] attribute, changing your [Recovery] from normal to [Iron 0]. Master all charlatan essence abilities to increase your [Recovery] attribute.

 - You have awakened the charlatan essence ability [Echo Spirit]. You have awakened 1 of 5 charlatan essence abilities.

Ability: [Echo Spirit] (Charlatan)

- Familiar (ritual).
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Summon an [Echo Spirit] to serve as a familiar.

“A familiar power,” Clive said. “You know, rather than wait until we get back from this shopping trip, we might want to rent one of the local Magic Society’s ritual rooms, wherever we end up, and do the rest of Lindy’s stones. If she has any more familiars, we’ll need to know the summoning materials while we’re still somewhere we can buy them.”

“That’s a good point,” Jason said. “I’m sure we can figure it out.”

The blue-grey light started emitting from Belinda on cue.

-
- Human racial ability [Essence Gift] has evolved to [Face in the Crowd].

Ability: [Face in the Crowd]

- Transfigured from [Human] ability [Essence Gift].

- Take on the form of another race. You may mimic a specific member of that race or otherwise alter your appearance within the parameters of the race’s natural features. Your aura blends into any surrounding auras, becoming difficult to detect, even with higher rank aura senses. You do not gain any abilities of that race.

“Shape-shifting,” Clive said. “Not a surprise. The charlatan essence is known for shape-shifting and illusion. Most prefer other options, however. Something that combines deception with attack powers for a more classic assassin power set. Oh, an extra one! Here we go.”

Belinda had lit up with blue grey light again as Clive was talking.

-
- Human racial ability [Special Attack Affinity] has evolved to [Form and Function].

Ability: [Form and Function]

- Transfigured from [Human] ability [Special Attack Affinity].
- When you take on the form of another race, gain some of their racial abilities in addition to your own. Your aura will match that of a member of the race you are mimicking.

“You lost the special attack bonus of humans,” Neil said.

“Good,” Belinda said. “I think I’ve made my stance on standing up the front and punching things quite clear. So, is that it?”

“Not quite,” Clive said.

“I put some fresh clothes in the washroom,” Sophie said. “Asano even donated a bottle of crystal wash.”

“Oh, right,” Belinda said and made a beeline for the adjacent washroom. Halfway there she started to look very queasy. Sophie caught up and led her through the door.

-
- You have absorbed 4/4 essences.
 - All your attributes have reached iron rank.
 - You have reached iron rank.
 - You have gained damage reduction against normal-rank damage sources.
 - You have gained increased resistance to normal-rank effects.
 - You have gained the ability to sense auras.
 - You have gained the ability to sustain yourself using sources of concentrated magic.

The rest of the team stood around awkwardly, all having been through the unpleasantness Belinda was experiencing in the next room. The purging of the body’s impurities was as disgusting an experience as adventurers went through. It was all the worse for the source of the offending filth being their own bodies.

“So, what does a body actually change into as it goes up ranks?” Jason asked. “Is it just magically-reinforced versions of the stuff we all have now?”

“No, and that’s actually quite interesting,” Clive said. “The higher the rank an Adventurer reaches, the more their body becomes like yours Jason; a physical manifestation of pure magic. The physical material that makes up their body is refined and replaced. Obviously, a high-ranker’s body is much better than yours.”

“My body? You mean an outworlder body?”

“I do.”

“But that’s just a monster body with a soul in it.”

“Yes,” Clive said. “Right now, all of us except you have the usual internal workings of our respective species. But you, Jason, are essentially an undifferentiated mass of biological tissue. You have a skeleton to hang it all on, enough muscle to get the job done and skin to hold it all in. A few extras, like hair and eyeballs. Blood, to keep the whole mess operating. Where we have things like lungs, a heart and such, You’re just a mass of extra flesh and blood your body can deploy as necessary.”

“What?” Jason asked in horror.

“It gives you an advantage over the rest of us,” Clive said enviously. “No spleen to burst, no lungs to puncture. No heart to stab.”

“Wait,” Jason said. “You’re saying I’m just a generic lump of biomass?”

“Yes,” Clive said. “We’ll all get there, eventually, but you’ve got that head start on us.”

“But I breathe,” Jason said. “I have a heartbeat.”

“Habit,” Clive said.

“Habit?”

“Essentially, your body is faking it. You don’t have a heart or lungs.”

“So, I could just go underwater and never drown?”

“Yes,” Clive said. “In fact, I’d recommend it. Fighting through that drowning reflex is a great way to break the breathing habit.”

“That sounds horrifying,” Jason said. “What happens when I eat?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t take any food out,” Clive said. “It would get all soggy.”

“Not when I’m trying to drown myself,” Jason said. “I mean, what happens to the food that I shove into my body?”

“The mass of flesh and blood inside you consumes it for energy with complete efficiency,” Clive said. “Strictly speaking, it wouldn’t even need to go in your mouth.”

This time everyone gave Clive horrified looks.

“What?” he asked. “It’s true.”

“Hold on,” Jason said, thinking of something else and desperately wanting to change the subject. “Emir told me that my body was formed using an imprint of my soul.”

“That’s broadly accurate,” Clive said.

“My body wasn’t a blob mass when I left my world. Why would my soul make a blob body?”

“Do you really think your soul travelled between worlds without being changed?” Clive asked. “A normal rank soul?”

"I suppose not," Jason said.

"Thadwick was actually interested in all this," Neil said.

"Really?" Humphrey asked. "I've known him since we were kids and I've never so much as seen him with a book."

"He had the theory he formulated for himself," Neil said. "Once he found out that healing fixes the differences between the soul and the body, he got it into his head that if constantly thought about... certain parts of himself being larger, all the time, it would imprint on his soul. Then, healing magic would actually make it happen."

After staring at Neil in disbelief, they all started laughing.

"Let me get this straight," Jason said between peals of laughter. "Thadwick spends all his time wandering around thinking about having a trouser zucchini?"

"That explains so much," Humphrey said.

"I know, right?" Jason agreed.

They stopped laughing as the washroom door opened and Sophie emerged.

"It wasn't too bad," she said. "Lindy will be out in a bit."

Sophie looked at the frozen expressions on her four male teammates.

"What were you all talking about before I came out here?"

"Nothing," Clive said, the others nodding their agreement.

"Everyone will be leaving for Greenstone tomorrow," Emir said. "Well, aside from my staff members who still have an underwater town to pore over. The scythe was the chief objective for my client, but the more information we dig up, the bigger the bonus."

"Wexler has been hiding from your historian," Jason said. "She been chasing her all over the cloud palace."

Jason had joined Emir in his domed office for afternoon tea, at Emir's request.

"The revelation of a random street thief knowing the lost martial art of an ancient order of assassins poses certain interesting questions."

"You and your historian can take that up with Wexler," Jason said. "I'm having nothing to do with it."

"No," Emir said, his penetrating gaze matched by a subtle aura pressure. "I have to imagine the man who triumphed over all others in the Reaper trials gleaned at least a few tasty truth nuggets."

Jason didn't try and push back the gold rank aura, letting it wash over him and giving Emir an indulgent smile. Emir chuckled, letting off the pressure.

“Speaking of tasty nuggets,” Emir said, “My people have been putting together something of a feast for the evening, with some of the various participating luminaries invited. I was hoping our illustrious victor could be convinced to play host.”

“I’m not sure about that,” Jason said. “I don’t always get along with aristocracy. They think the right to deference is something you inherit, like a cupboard from your grandmother that smells like a cat died in a lavender field about thirty years ago.”

“Well, that’s a very specific stance, if nothing else. To be honest, I’m looking for a way around the kind of etiquette clash such a disparate array of nobles always seems to invite. Everyone is clamouring to meet the man who bested all their very well trained and resourced children, and if you’re the host, then you set the rules. And of course, there’s no rank at an Asano barbecue, is there?”

“No there isn’t,” Jason said with a chuckle. “Will that even work, though?”

“Probably not,” Emir said. “But if they’re forewarned about the expected etiquette, then their participation is a tacit agreement to the host’s established rules, even if the host is a little unconventional. I’ll tell them the dress code is extreme casual.”

“So, they have to agree to Asano barbecue rules or not show up,” Jason said. “Not bad.”

“Do try and be diplomatic about it,” Emir said.

“I’ll do my best,” Jason said. “Fair warning, though: my best isn’t great. But who knows how many favours I owe you at this point, so count me in.”

“A rather odd young man once told me that friends don’t count favours.”

“He sounds wise beyond his years. And dashingly handsome.”

Emir chuckled, shaking his head.

“I’ll have Hester portal you out for your shopping trip in the morning,” Emir said. “She suggested leaving you in her home town, which is, in fact a huge city. You can spend a few days there, while she takes the chance to visit family. She can portal you directly back to Greenstone, after.”

“What kind of range does she have on that?” Jason asked.

“She may still be silver,” Emir said, “but her portal ability has hit gold rank. She can go anywhere in the world she’s visited before.”

“Nice.”

“You may want to spend the afternoon liaising with my staff, then,” Emir said. “Stick with Constance and she’ll have you ready for hosting duties in no time.”

Chapter 182: Particular Appetites

In the old stone fortress in Old City, now a neutral ground of criminal delights, one of Cole Silva's thugs knocked on the door of Silva's office.

"Enter," came a gruff bark from inside. The thug went in, his body screaming reluctance.

"Boss?"

"What?"

"You asked for any news about Wexler."

"And?"

"She was part of the team that brought back the thing that big-time out-of-towner was after. I don't think we'll ever have a shot at her, boss."

A short time later, two more thugs dragged the body out of the office as Silva strode back and forth, fuming.

"You want us to send someone to clean up the blood, boss?"

"No," Silva snarled, then stopped his pacing. "Find Killian Laurent and have him come see me."

Emir had not entirely thrown out the usual decorum of a high society soiree, with one of his staff announcing each of the prestigious guests as they arrived. The guests were then met by Constance, at her most proper, and Jason, considerably less so.

"It didn't occur to you to wear long pants?" Constance asked him quietly between arrivals.

"Nah," Jason said.

Zara Rimaros was the next to arrive, flanked by her two offsidiers and accompanied by an older woman. Zara's companion was another celestine with the same caramel skin set off by sapphire eyes and hair. She looked around thirty but Jason had come to recognise the agelessness of essence users, even if her politely retracted but unmistakably silver-rank aura hadn't given it away. There was something behind the eyes of high-rankers; something about the way they carried themselves. An absolute confidence that low-rankers, even amongst the nobility, were yet to develop. This woman was practically bursting with it.

"Jason," Zara greeted with a smile full of dangerous promise. "Might I introduce my aunt, Vesper Rimaros."

“A genuine pleasure,” Jason greeted, his respectful tone wholly incongruous with his short pants, floral print shirt and open-toe sandals.

“I’ve heard much about you,” Vesper greeted, apparently unfazed by Jason’s outfit.

“Oh,” Jason winced. “Don’t worry, we got all the heidels back, and most of them weren’t too traumatised. We’re completely out of fruit chutney after all that, though, so let me save you the trouble of checking the condiments table.”

“What are you talking about?” Vesper asked, whose eyebrows had slowly climbed up above her otherwise schooled expression. Jason’s expression was suddenly that of a man realising he’d said too much.

“Uh... nothing,” he said, looking about nervously. “You should say hello to Emir. He’s around here, somewhere.”

Zara, hid a giggle behind her hand, flashing her eyes at Jason.

“Emir Bahadir is currently a person of interest to our royal family over a theft that took place several years ago,” Zara told him, her words formal but her voice unable to excise the undertone of mirth.

“And he still invited you?” Jason asked. “What a magnanimous bloke.”

“You know, Jason,” Zara said. “At the risk of self-aggrandisement, I like to think that when someone meets me, I’m the most interesting person they meet that day. I’m not used to being upstaged by gods.”

“Never fear,” Jason said. “You were absolutely the most interesting person I met that day. I’m pretty sure gods are just big lumps of magic that have been around so long they gained sentience and started having funny ideas.”

“That comes dangerously close to blasphemy,” Zara’s aunt said.

“Blasphemy is kind of my thing,” Jason said.

“And yet, you were just personally and publicly praised by multiple gods,” Zara said.

“I know, right?” Jason asked. “It’s a funny old world.”

Danielle Geller came upon Rick Geller, standing alone. He was only a distant relative, to the point she wasn’t sure what their actual relation was. Some kind of much-removed nephew, from what she recalled. She had come to admire and respect the young man who had been as close to the family’s recent tragedies as anyone, losing two members of his team who were closely related. Rather than swear vengeance, he had grown into his responsibilities as a leader. Instead of dwelling on those who had fallen, he focused on protecting those that remained.

She noticed his gaze locked on something across the room. She followed it to where Jason was speaking quietly with the Rimaros princess and her royal aunt. Danielle noted the body language of the princess and the confused expression on Vesper Rimaros' face she had come to associate with people talking to Jason.

"That's the hurricane princess," Rick said.

Danielle sighed.

"I don't understand people who insist on these overblown sobriquets," Danielle said. "She's iron-rank, for goodness sake. None of you have had a chance to truly prove yourselves."

They watched Zara giggle at something Jason said, putting a hand over her mouth.

"How does he do that?" Rick asked and Danielle looked at him.

"No offence, dear boy, but a woman like that would chew you up and spit you out. I thought you were interested in one of the young ladies on your team?"

"Yes," Rick said. Normally he wouldn't admit it, but no one who had been through Geller training would consider lying to Danielle.

"I could use some of Jason's way with women," Rick said wistfully. "Really, how does he do that?"

"Did you ask him?"

"He said that what he had can't be taught."

Danielle chuckled.

"Probably true," she said. "Would you like me to tell you why?"

"Yes," Rick said enthusiastically, turning to look at Danielle.

"When it comes to princesses or other highborn women, do you know how often they meet someone who doesn't care they're a princess? Never, probably, at least in their own age group. The smarter boys learn the value of pretending they don't care, which makes the smarter young women very good at spotting it. All the more, for the social training they undergo. Then along comes Jason, who genuinely doesn't care who their family is. Add a little wit, a disregard for propriety and a penchant for the taboo and you're waving fresh meat in front of a hungry animal."

"I don't think I can be as brazen as Jason," Rick said.

"Nor should you be," Danielle said. "Jason is who he is, without apology or shame. He accepts the consequences, knowing that as many or more will hate him for it as be drawn to him. People respect authenticity, however, even when it's as unusual as Jason's. There's an integrity to it. That's what you are looking for. You don't need to be like Jason. You need to figure out who you are, Rickard. Be true to that and accept the

consequences. Then you won't have to go looking for the right people because you'll have already learned to recognise them."

"You really think it's that simple?" Rick asked.

"I do," Danielle said. "Simple, however, is not the same thing as easy."

Jason was still greeting new arrivals, the steady presence of Constance a guiding light. She would subtly indicate a guest who would not respond well to Jason's particular social graces and he affected enough civility that no one made a fuss, in spite of his, to their eyes, ludicrous appearance.

Various groups had arrived from various religious organisations, many of whom were at a loss as to how to handle Jason. One such group was from the church of knowledge.

"Gabrielle," Jason greeted. "I didn't realise you were participating in the trials."

"My lady felt that I would benefit from facing challenges where I did not have her to rely upon."

"Yeah, the Healer mentioned that the gods couldn't access astral spaces. It's always fun to hear that even gods have their limits."

Behind him, Constance pointedly cleared her throat.

"My lady has prepared another gift for you," Gabrielle said, clearly unhappy to be delivering the message. "She believes you will find it more palatable than the last. It shall be delivered on your return to Greenstone."

"I'm a little wary, after the last one," Jason said.

"She is certain that this one will be more welcome."

"I guess we'll see," Jason said.

Hester was one of Emir's most important staff members. She was in charge of logistics and coordination between all of Emir's disparate operations, for which her portal ability was a crucial tool.

Hester was from Pranay, this world's equivalent of Sri Lanka. In this world, however, it was a much larger, located further to the south and west. In a world where the Arabian Peninsula did not exist and the Mediterranean connected directly to the Indian Ocean, it's northern coast was home to several important connections for sea trade.

Hester had been born in one of those ports, the city of Jayapura. She opened a portal through which Jason and his team stepped into. They emerged from the portal with mixed reactions to the transition. Jason and Sophie, with their astral affinities were unaffected.

They immediately started taking in their surroundings, including their team members who handled the transition less well.

Humphrey had a teleport power of his own, so while not immune to the disorientation, was at least used to it. Portalling across a continent was more straining than across a room, but he took a deep breath and was fine. Clive and Neil were less experienced but it was not their first time, staggering a little before righting themselves. Belinda had the worst of it, lurching dizzily until Sophie stepped in to prevent her from falling over entirely. Stash the puppy stumbled about before toppling over and letting out an unhappy whine.

They were in a courtyard full of lush plants, in raised planters and hanging from walls. The walls, planters and even the floor were covered in mosaic tiles in bright, cool colours. The shades of blue, green and turquoise gave the courtyard an underwater feeling, the vibrant space lit up by the bright sunlight. The air was hot, like that in Greenstone but drier, without the mugginess produced from the delta. The heat was cut by a fresh breeze with a tang of the sea, blowing in through archways leading out of the courtyard.

Hester gave them a tour of what turned out to be a magnificent house on a clifftop, overlooking the ocean. Tunnels dug down into the rock, with stone stairwells leading down into a network of cave grottos. Platforms of metal and wood wound through the caves, suspended over the water below. Magic glow stones lit up the caves, both under the water and above.

“There are guest rooms down here or up above,” Hester told them. “You can choose whichever you prefer.”

“Down here,” Jason said immediately, grinning like a loon as he looked over a railing and into the water.

“If you want to swim, feel free,” Hester said, continuing to lead them through the colourfully-lit caves. “The main entertaining grotto actually has a bar you can only get to by swimming. Or flying, water-walking, teleporting. Whatever powers you might have.”

“You have a magnificent home,” Jason said as Hester led them back upstairs.

“You can travel a lot as an adventurer,” Hester told him, “especially with a power like mine. I think it’s important to have somewhere to come home to, though. And, of course, being adventurers gives us the means to have that.”

Hester introduced them to her extended family, all of whom lived in the expansive compound sprawling over the top of the cliff. Like many successful adventurers, she had provided her family with essences and monster cores to extend their longevity, even if they never fought a monster themselves. Hester’s family were extremely welcoming, especially Hester’s mother, Anise.

“She never brings home friends,” Anise was saying to Jason as they walked, joining them for the rest of the tour.

“Mother...”

“Oh, hush dear. You really must tell me what Hester has been up to, Jason. She’s always so secretive.”

“Let me think,” Jason said. “Ah, I know. A little while ago, there was a big expedition that went out from the city where we’ve been staying. It was a huge deal, and they sent along everyone who could open a portal or do a mass teleport. Of course, then they ended up in an astral space they couldn’t portal out of. Are you familiar with astral spaces, Anise?”

“Oh, yes,” Anise said. “So many rumours going around these days about them.”

“Well, it turned out that expedition was in desperate need of help, and it was Hester who made that happen. Without her, no one would have gotten there in time.”

“Why aren’t you the one to tell me about these things?” Anise asked Hester.

“I didn’t really do anything,” Hester said.

“Nonsense,” Jason said. “She’s an absolute hero. Humphrey and Neil, here, were on that expedition. They might not be here if it weren’t for your daughter.”

“He’s blowing things out of proportion,” Hester said.

They came to a pathway outside the house from which they could see the city sprawling down from the hilltop upon which the Hesters’ home was located. It was much larger than Greenstone, spreading out over the coastline, alongside the cerulean ocean sparkling in the sunlight.

“This is beautiful,” Jason said as they stopped to look out. “Thank you for sharing your home with us, Hester.”

“I’m just happy you managed to bring that scythe back,” Hester said. “Emir seems like a relaxed boss, but he wasn’t great to be around while you were in the astral space. The prospect of no one bringing it back after two years of effort? The whole staff is just about ready to kiss you. Don’t let them, though. Especially Weird Pants Keith.”

Killian Laurent was an elf who looked like the villain from a fairy story, with ugly, sunken features, emaciated limbs and sickly pallid skin. Dressed in ill-fitted black, even the way he walked had an unpleasant, obsequiousness to it. He sidled into Silva’s office, not even glancing at the blood soaking into the rug. Silva stood with his back to the door, not turning around at Killian’s entrance.

“You once made a suggestion to me,” Silva said without preamble. “I declined.”

“You did not want to take the risk of discovery,” Killian said in his raspy voice.

“Since then, I have been discretely approached,” Silva said. “Someone offered assistance that may make something like what you suggested more viable.”

“You are ready to take the girl?”

“No,” Silva said. “I was offered assistance in taking the man who took her from me. She’ll get hers when the man who holds her indenture contract is flushed out to sea in a thousand pieces. Is this something you can make happen?”

“Mr Silva, I am a man of particular appetites,” Killian said. “I moved my loyalties from your father to you, because you have my appetites met reliably and discreetly, where your father would not. People of my inclination operate in very small circles, and I am familiar with a man, a silver-rank adventurer, with predilections not unlike my own. There is no way such a man, being silver-rank, would enter your employ. But if he were offered the same arrangement I enjoy, I imagine he would be willing to undertake the occasional favour. For example, the quiet acquisition of a troublesome young adventurer.”

“How reliable is this man?”

“I can assure you, Mr Silva, that he is a man of exquisite caution.”

Silva did not respond for a long time, still staring at the wall without turning to face Killian.

“Very well,” Silva said. “Set up a meeting; I want to talk to this man. Also, find out exactly what he will want before the meeting happens.”

Chapter 183: Domineering, Territorial and Robust

For those who could afford them, personal transport in Jayapura consisted of small discs that floated in the air, underfoot, the rider directing them by shifting their weight. Hester brought a number of them out onto an open area of lawn for the visitors to get a handle on.

“Hoverboards!” Jason called out cheerfully.

“Their actually called personal float discs,” Clive corrected him.

“Hoverboards!”

“That’s not..”

“Hoverboards!” Jason asserted again. Stash turned into a bird and flew onto Jason’s head, echoing his cry.

“Hoverboards!”

“Good boy,” Jason said, giving bird Stash a biscuit.

Smaller float discs, like those Hester had brought out, were for standing on. She explained that there were larger ones, each of which had a seat on them. Use of those by anyone other than the physically infirm were looked down on, however.

Humphrey and Clive had used them before, while Sophie and Jason found their balance quickly. Neil and Belinda had more trouble, struggling to get their disc to move, only for it to shoot out from under them as it did. While they continued to practice, Jason skimmed around the edges of the yard, giggling like a madman.

“Hoverboards,” he said happily, pulling up next to Clive. “Why do we not have these in Greenstone?”

“The magical density is too low,” Clive said. “It’s why all the magical vehicles need someone like me to drive them.”

“Doesn’t that make your ability kind of useless here?” Jason asked at which Clive grinned.

“You need someone like me to drive that,” Clive said, pointing up. Jason looked into the air, where what looked like a zeppelin was floating gracefully through the sky. Instead of an inflated envelope of air, it had what looked like the frame of one, visibly glowing with magic.

“Awesome,” Jason said.

Eventually Hester judged Neil and Belinda ready for strictly supervised use of the float discs and they started down the hill and into the city, carefully for the benefit of Belinda and Neil.

“Did we have to start off downhill?” Neil asked as he nervously controlled his disc.

“Not to say I don’t agree with the sentiment,” Belinda said, likewise moving with caution. “It might be a bit much to ask Hester to move her house somewhere flatter for our benefit.”

Hester led them into the city, passing through older and older sections as they moved closer to the centre. Their destination was the Mystic Quarter, where the city’s main temples were located, along with the Magic and Adventure Society campuses.

“The Adventure Society trade hall should be the place to find most of what you’re after,” Hester told them. “You may need the Magic Society for some of the ritual components. In any case, the trade hall brokers will take all the loot you’d care to trade off your hands.”

Adventure Society campus dwarfed that of Greenstone’s, although it lacked the open simplicity. Instead, it was a warren of tight alleys and narrow streets, with building hugging together like goods bundled in a crate. It was more like a town, with the trade hall alone being the size of a village.

“You should enjoy this, Humphrey,” Jason said as they moved through the crowds of the main trade hall. “Unlike in Greenstone, there’s no one to recognise you. You can just be some guy, here.”

After visiting the brokers, they spent some time shopping around, Jason’s group chat allowing them to stay in contact when they split up. They moved through the crowded trade hall, the maelstrom of voices all around them, hawking and haggling.

“Does anyone have any crystal wash?” they heard a voice calling out. “Everywhere seems to be sold out, all of a sudden.”

The team regroup outside the trade hall to compare purchases. They had only bought a few things, their main purpose being to hand over their awakening stones and essences to the brokers for auction. There was market enough that auctions took place daily, so they would be able to collect their earnings in the morning.

“I got a line on a magical tattooist with the skills I need,” Jason said. “Someone who can apply the immortal crest.”

The immortal crest was an item Jason obtained during the trials that was unusual in nature. Using it required the services of a specialist magic craftsperson, none of whom resided in Greenstone. Humphrey had used one himself, while travelling with his mother.

Item: [Immortal Crest] (iron rank, rare)

An object that allows the soul to mark the body (consumable, tattoo).

- **Effect:** When applied by a mystical tattooist, this item will draw out a soul crest. This item can only be used on an iron rank essence user.

After acquiring the item, Jason had asked Clive about it. Clive, in turn, roped in Humphrey, who already had a soul crest. A soul crest, they explained, was a magical tattoo printed not on the body, but on the soul. That imprint would appear on the body in turn, in a form that resisted design. The form of the crest was a visible reflection of the bearer's true nature.

The value of the crest was as a form of identification. The unique imprint on the aura remained the same, even if the aura itself changed and the visible form of the crest with it. Impossible to track or falsify through even the strongest magic, so long as there was a record of the imprint, it was a guaranteed proof of identity.

Immortal crests were difficult and expensive to make, especially for an iron-rank item, but many wealthy adventurers commissioned one, nonetheless. Once the Adventure Society had a record of the imprint, it was an ironclad proof of identity that could be verified at any branch in the world.

The visible form of the crest could not be chosen, instead reflecting the soul that produced it. This had famously mixed results.

"If we're going to see a magical tattooist," Humphrey said, "then you should all get one. I already did, when I used my immortal crest."

Deciding to make that their next stop, Clive explained magical tattoos as they traversed the city on their hover-discs.

"It will only last as long as your current rank," Clive told them. "It gets purged from your body as you rank up, along with any other magical waste that doesn't hold up to your new rank. That leaves you free to get a new tattoo at your new rank."

"What do they do?" Belinda asked. "I've heard of magic tattoos, but never seen one."

"We can change that," Humphrey said. He pulled back his sleeve to show an intricate sigil on his upper arm, confident enough in his skill with the floating disc to do so without falling off. The tattoo's colour was a brilliant shade of blue that shimmered like sunlight on the ocean.

"Different tattoos do different things," Clive said. "That looks like a mana-accumulating one."

“That’s right,” Humphrey said. “It slowly accumulates mana, which I can absorb when I need it. It’s basically a mana potion that takes a few hours to refill itself.”

“The functions of iron-rank tattoos are quite basic,” Clive explained, “so most people go for some variant on health or mana recovery, be that a moderate increase to natural recovery, or an on-demand burst like Humphrey has there. There are other options, though. A short burst of damage reduction, or reducing the cooldown of an ability. Effects like that are single-use and take an amount of time to recover before being used again.”

“How many can you get?” Sophie asked.

“Just the one,” Clive said. “Usually, anyway. There are essence abilities that can increase that. My rune essence, for example, will frequently produce that type of ability. I didn’t get one of those, though.”

Following the directions Jason had obtained, Hester guided them away from the main areas of the Mystic Quarter, the streets growing narrower and the building older as they went.

“Are you sure this place we’re going is legitimate?” Neil asked Jason.

“Are you kidding?” Jason asked. “Mysterious shopkeepers in dilapidated parts of the city where most would never tread are always better.”

“According to whom?” Neil asked.

“Eighties movies.”

“Eighty what?”

“I’ll assess the place for myself,” Hester said.

They found the tattoo shop, and while the dingy exterior was not confidence-inducing, the interior was a stark contrast, with polished wood, shining tiles and glass as pristine as a cloudless winter sky. Hung on the walls were pictures of various tattoos, some artistic, others with descriptions of their effects.

“If the craftsmanship we can expect is a match for what’s on display here,” Clive said, examining the pictures, “then I don’t foresee any problems.”

“Agreed,” Hester said, likewise looking over the displays. She turned to Jason.

“Who told you about this place?” she asked.

“I was asking around at the trade hall,” Jason said. “I couldn’t much tell good advice from the bad, so I tried something else. They don’t differentiate the trade hall by rank like they do back in Greenstone; it’s all mixed together. So I started looking for places that seemed a bit less impressive than you’d expect at the trade hall. Eventually I found a place that didn’t look like much and everyone seemed to ignore, but every person I saw go in was clearly a top-flight adventurer. It was all silver and gold rankers, the kind who have

plain-looking gear that you can tell is actually the good stuff if you pay attention. So, I went in, had a little chat with the guy running it and he gave me a tip.”

“Just like that?” Sophie asked.

“Well... I did have to promise to send Neil in for a special visit.”

“What?” Neil asked.

“It’ll be fine,” Jason said. They really liked the sound of a chunky elf. We should start looking for a sailor suit soon, though, because finding one in your size might be tricky.”

“They?”

“I think he had some mates he wanted to bring along. The more, the merrier, right?”

“You know that someone is going to tie you to a boulder and drop you in the ocean one day,” Neil said.

“That’s fine,” Jason said. “It turns out that I don’t need to breathe.”

A wiry woman emerged from a back room. She looked older, but hale and weathered like a tree that survived storm after storm. Jason was unable to detect any aura from her at all.

“I was wondering who was making a commotion in my shop,” she said, looking them over. “Not a lot of boisterous youths darken my door. Accompanied by Hester Maharala, no less. The lady with the house on the hill. Are you still following that Bahadir boy around?”

“You know Emir?” Hester asked.

“Know might be a strong word,” the woman said. “We crossed paths when he was still a precocious boy. Good to hear he took up treasure hunting, because he was only a so-so adventurer. That couple he ran around with, now they knew their business. The sneaky one, too.”

“Gabriel and Arabella Remore,” Jason said. “We’ll be seeing them soon, if you’d like us to pass on a greeting.”

“Oh, they don’t want to hear from some old shopkeeper,” she said. “Who is it that sent you my way?”

“The man selling magic lamps in the trade hall,” Jason said.

“And you were the one who got it out of him?” she asked. “He probably saw you were an outworlder and got all excitable, the damn coot.”

“I’m Jason Asano. May I have your name?”

“Tilly is good enough. You didn’t come here just for tattoos, Jason Asano. You could get them plenty of places, cheaper and easier.”

Jason took out a plain metal plate and handed it over.

“Immortal crest,” Tilly said, turning it over in her hands. “Who made this?”

“Me, kind of,” Jason said. “A looting ability. Of sorts.”

“Of weird sorts, to produce something like this. Alright, I can get you sorted out. Once we’ve settled the matter of price.”

“And that is?” Jason asked

“Is the chunky elf with the sailor suit on the table?”

Jason blinked in surprise, then burst out laughing.

“Gods damn you, Asano,” Neil said.

“The price is money, of course,” Tilly said with a twinkle in her eye. “It’s a tattoo shop. It’ll be a wheelbarrow full of coins for an immortal crest and a day or two to get things ready.”

“Once today’s auctions have gone through, we’ll have wheelbarrows of cash to spare,” Jason said. “In the meantime, We’ll get some enchanted tattoos.”

Tilly took them back into a workroom with a big chair, plus needles and pots of oils, unguents and powders. Light came from the large skylight over their heads.

“You first,” Tilly said to Humphrey. “Shirt off.”

“I already have a tattoo,” Humphrey said.

“I don’t care,” she said. “I want a look at that soul crest. The price of me doing one for your friend.”

Humphrey tugged off his shirt, revealing his impressive physique.

“Damn, Humphrey,” Jason said. “I didn’t realise you waxed your chest.”

“I don’t wax my chest.”

“You do seem oddly hairless,” Belinda said. “Do you get that hair-removal cream from Jory?”

“No!”

“I think he has some kind of magic crystal he uses for shaving,” Jason said.

“Would you please stop talking about my chest hair.”

“You don’t have any chest hair,” Belinda said. “That’s kind of the whole point.”

“Stop gabbing and turn around,” Tilly told Humphrey, who was clearly relieved to do so. It revealed a startling image on Humphrey’s back; a rainbow-coloured dragon on a great, sand-coloured shield. The dragon’s scales glimmered in the light, making it seem like a living thing.”

“Whoever drew this out knew their business,” Tilly assessed. “This is the Vitesse style. Was it Klimpsen?”

“You can tell that just from looking at it?” Humphrey asked. “I though the image was determined by the soul.”

“It is,” Tilly said. “It’s shaped by the artist that drew it out of your soul, though. Klimpfen was a good choice but he doesn’t work for just anyone. You must have some good family connections.”

“His mum is kind of a big deal,” Jason said.

“Lucky for some,” Tilly said. “You next, Asano. I need to know what I’m dealing with to make the right preparations. Shirt off.”

Jason looked at Humphrey as he self-consciously removed his shirt. Jason’s body was as fit as it had ever been but looked flabby and meagre next to Humphrey.

“How is that fair,” Jason said. “You look like some famous sculpture brought to life by a witch to steal my girlfriend.”

“You don’t have a girlfriend,” Humphrey said.

“Rub it in, why don’t you.”

Tilly shoved Jason around and started prodding at his back with her wizened fingers.

“You shouldn’t get anything too embarrassing as a crest. You wouldn’t believe the number of sheltered young idiots that get an immortal crest and aren’t happy with a crest that reveals who they truly are. Which yours will too, make no mistake. If you don’t think you can handle seeing what you really are, then I’d stop here.”

“It is what it is,” Jason said. “Worst case, shirts are a thing.”

“Interesting aura,” Tilly said, continuing to ply Jason’s back. “Domineering and territorial. Robust, especially for your rank. Something else, too. Are you some kind of priest?”

The whole team laughed at that.

“He’s definitely not,” Neil said. “If anything, he’s the exact opposite.”

“It’s a little odd to find a touch of the divine on you, then.”

“I’ve been touched by gods, alright,” Jason said. “They’re quite handsy, once you get to know them.”

Chapter 184

More Shady as We Go Along

Tilly provided the group with catalogues that took the form of recording crystals, allowing them to look through projections of the available magic tattoos.

"I'm going to take the burst healing rune," Sophie said and was soon in the big chair in her undershirt as Tilly pricked needles into her arm.

"You want privacy for this?" Jason asked her.

"You've never seen a woman's shoulder before? I feel sorry for that Cassandra girl, now."

By the time the red rune Tilly drew onto Sophie's arm was complete, the others had picked out their own tattoos. Belinda chose one that would allow her to ignore the delay before she could use an ability again. This would allow her to use her cooldown reduction power twice in a row, which would, in turn, let someone else use a powerful ability three times in quick succession. That tattoo was a small one printed on the back of the neck.

Clive took the same one, while Jason took one that made his afflictions slightly harder to resist. Jason's was imprinted on his chest, right over his heart.

"You have an impressively broad repertoire," Humphrey complimented Tilly. "The place I received my tattoo had a more restrictive selection."

"Klimpsen does quality work," Tilly said, not looking up from where she was putting needles into Jason's chest. "He's not what you'd call an innovator, though. He's the guy you go to for reliability, rather than originality."

Neil was originally going to take a tattoo that gave a general increase to his mana recovery speed, but had his mind changed by Tilly. She was able to do a burst mana-recovery tattoo, essentially a free mana potion, with a recharge time affected by his mana recovery rate. Given that Sophie and Clive both enhanced team mana recovery, he would be able to use the tattoo with enviable frequency.

Like Jason, Neil's tattoo went on the chest, but when Neil took his shirt off, it got loud reactions from the team.

"Wow," Belinda said.

"Yep," Sophie agreed, both women tilting their heads as they ran their eyes over Neil's muscular body.

"What?" Neil asked.

"Uh, we all thought you were fat," Clive said.

"Wait, you really did think I was fat?"

"I didn't," Jason said, at which Neil wheeled on him.

"You're the one responsible for this and you didn't even think I was fat?"

"I'm not going to mock an actual fat guy," Jason said. "That's just punching down. Also, your tailor is the one responsible, not me."

"Your outfits really aren't flattering," Humphrey agreed. "Is there padding in them?"

"No, there isn't padding in them."

"They drape very poorly," Jason said. "You should try Gilbert's in the trade hall back in Greenstone. He sadly doesn't sell short pants or floral print, but if you want to look good, he's your guy."

"You go to Gilbert's too?" Humphrey asked Jason.

"I do," Jason said. "I think he makes you look better than me though. You've got those powerful shoulders."

Once all the tattoos were done, they made arrangements to return the day after next for Jason's crest. After all their shopping, the sky was growing dark and they returned to Hester's house.

Hester's extended family had gathered for her return, welcoming the team into their home for an evening of food and family. Jason quickly found his way to the kitchen, while everyone else gathered on an entertaining deck underground where colourful lights lit up the grotto as they watched the sun go down over the sea through a west-facing cave entrance that looked out along the coast.

Belinda retired early, in anticipation of using no less than sixteen awakening stones the next day, plus summoning at least one familiar. Late in the evening, Sophie spotted Jason in his conjured cloak, walking over the water in the grotto and out through the cave entrance. She quietly dropped over the railing, using her slow-fall power to alight on the surface of the water herself. She followed him out, where the ocean water was eerily still, the light of two moons shining down on it. The hood of Jason's cloak was pushed back of his head, tilted back and looking at the night sky.

"Clive gave you a telling off, the other day," he said, apparently sensing her in spite of her moving in silence. Her perception powers enhanced her ability to sense auras, yet she could barely sense his. Those same abilities had allowed her to sense Jason's aura control as it became increasingly precise in the time they had known one another. She knew the dead friend she had never met had taught Jason the techniques he was passing onto her, fastidious practice seemingly his way of connecting with his absent mentor.

"I probably shouldn't have hit you so much," she said.

“I understand,” Jason said, keeping his gaze on the stars. “I know you were holding back and I wasn’t hurt. You should probably be looking for healthier expressions of freedom, though.”

“Am I free?” She asked.

“If you want to leave and never come back, just talk to Hester,” Jason said. “I told you that from the start.”

“I’ve come a long way since then,” Sophie said. “You’ve put a good amount of capital into making me an adventurer, both monetary and political.”

Jason turned his gaze from the sky to her, frowning.

“I’m tired of having this conversation. I’m tired of justifying myself, as if I’m somehow not good enough to have done something just because it was right. As far as I’m concerned I don’t have an indentured servant. I have a teammate who keeps talking about leaving. If you’re going to go, do us a favour and go now, because we’ll need to find new people.”

“Belinda and I aren’t going anywhere.”

“Good,” he said testily, “because I am done talking about this.”

Jason vanished into the shadow of his cloak, which drifted emptily before disappearing as well.

Sophie stared at the spot he had been standing.

“Good job, Wexler,” she admonished herself.

In the morning the team left without the guidance of Hester, leaving her to catch up with family. They had seen enough of the city to muddle through, having already visited the Mystic Quarter in which it was located. It wasn’t hard to get directions to the Magic Society campus and Belinda and Neil’s increasing proficiency with the floating discs compensated for the time they lost through lacking of a guide.

Clive took the lead at the Magic Society, his understanding of the Society’s workings getting them prompt consideration. They decided the order of the day would be to hire a ritual room and conduct all Belinda’s remaining awakening rituals. Afterwards, they would purchase the materials Jason and Belinda would need to summon familiars. Belinda already had one such power and, with sixteen powers to be awakened, had a good chance of getting more.

“A companion specialist would be interesting,” Humphrey said. “My sister’s abilities are like that. It would make for some interesting potential, on top of the familiars and summons we already have.”

“I think a support specialist is more likely,” Clive said, “based on the power’s we’ve seen so far. Only four powers in, though, it could be anything, really.”

“Either works for me,” Belinda said. “As long as I’m not in front of someone, swinging a great big sword.”

“We have Humphrey for that,” Jason said.

As they awakened Belinda’s powers one by one, her abilities fell broadly into three categories. As expected, her trap essence produced area control powers. One was an ability Clive had from the rune essence, called rune trap. Another conjured a dimensional-space pit trap under the feet of enemies, while the final two powers used magical tethers to affect enemies in different ways.

From the magic essence she gained abilities with effects predicated on the powers of others. She had a curse that caused enemy power use to lock them out from another of their abilities. An ability called power thief was a special ranged attack that would lock out an enemy’s power, giving Belinda the power to use instead. She had a spell that let her mimic spells recently used by allies, while her final ability was another summoned familiar, called an astral lantern.

“Lantern-type familiars are quite good,” Humphrey said. “Judging by my sister’s, at least.”

“They tend to be ranged attackers,” Clive said.

The adept essence started out well, with a perception power that let her see magic, like Clive. It got better with an aura that caused allied abilities to come off cooldown faster, followed by a power, usable once per day, that reset every cooldown a person had. It was the last adept ability to awaken where things started going off the rails, at least from Belinda’s perspective.

-
- You have awakened the adept essence ability [Instant Adept]. You have awakened 5 of 5 adept essence abilities.
 - You have awakened all adept essence abilities. Linked attribute [Speed] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank adept essence ability.

Ability: [Instant Adept] (Adept)

- Special ability.
- Cost: Very high mana.
- Cooldown: 6 hours.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).

- **Effect (iron):** Gain a significant increase to the [Speed] attribute and temporary proficiency with acrobatics, small blades and ranged weapons. Your maximum stamina increases and you gain an ongoing stamina recovery effect.
-

“What kind of ability is this?” she asked as she read the power.

“I’ve seen these before,” Clive said. “They bestow a particular set of skills, much like a skill-book, but only temporarily. It lets you fill archetypal roles, not as well as a specialist, obviously, but if that’s what you need at the time then it’s very useful.”

“It says ranged weapons,” Jason said. “It might be good. Get yourself a good magic bow, fire some arrows down range and then escape with those acrobatic skills it mentions.”

“I suppose that isn’t too bad,” Belinda said grudgingly before they moved onto the next power.

By that stage, she only had two powers from the charlatan essence left to awaken, which had already produced two unusual powers. Beside myself was a power that rendered her invisible while an illusion mimicked her nearby. Unexpected allies was a power that used illusions to make allies look like enemies, but the allies could see through it. The spell then randomly switch-teleported all the allies and enemies in the area with each other.

“It has to be better than that stupid learning archery power,” Belinda said as Clive completed the ritual.

- **You have awakened the charlatan essence ability [Counterfeit Combatant]. You have awakened 4 of 5 charlatan essence abilities.**

Ability: [Counterfeit Combatant] (Charlatan)

- **Special ability (shape-change).**
 - **Cost: Very high mana.**
 - **Cooldown: 6 hours.**

 - **Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).**

 - **Effect (iron):** Gain a significant increase to the [Power] attribute and temporary proficiency with armour and melee weaponry. Your physique enlarges, your maximum stamina increases and you gain an ongoing stamina recovery effect.
-

“Oh, gods damn it.”

“It does bring some versatility to the team,” Humphrey offered.

“I don’t want versatility! The team’s already thick with versatility! I want to stand at the back, being all clever and disruptive. What’s clever about braining some guy with a scimitar?”

“It doesn’t have to be clever,” Humphrey said. “It just has to be useful.”

“You think putting me up the front to hit people will be useful?”

“It’ll be unexpected,” Jason offered. “Who expects a small, adorable person to whack them upside the head with a big hammer?”

“I think I understand the specific dimensional space you awakened now,” Clive said. “As you’ll no doubt recall, it’s unique nuance was the ability to directly equip or unequip gear. Given your new abilities to take on specific roles, that now becomes very useful.”

“Are you telling me that my next ability might be another one of these idiotic powers to hit people with weapons, like a thug?”

“I wouldn’t think so,” Clive said. “You already have powers to turn you into a fast attacker and a strong attacker.”

“Maybe you’ll be able to turn into a healer,” Neil said. “The ability to have another in a pinch would be amazing.”

“That’s true,” Belinda acknowledged, calming down. Clive conducted her final ritual of awakening.

-
- You have awakened the charlatan essence ability [Specious Sorcerer]. You have awakened 5 of 5 charlatan essence abilities.
 - You have awakened all charlatan essence abilities. Linked attribute [Recovery] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank adept essence ability.

Ability: [Specious Sorcerer] (Charlatan)

- Special ability.
- Cost: Very high mana.
- Cooldown: 6 hours.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): Gain a significant increase to the [Spirit] attribute and the ability to use magical tools. Your maximum mana increases and you gain an ongoing mana recovery effect.

Belinda groaned.

“Is it just me,” she asked, “or are these ability names becoming more shady as we go along?”

“These abilities may seem underwhelming now,” Clive said, “but remember this is only the beginning. Power like these usually offer up extra powers to use while they are active. Your adept power will most likely give utility abilities, while the strength and magic based ones will probably give you special attacks and spells, respectively. You could even consider them to be a means to get more abilities than everyone else.”

“Yeah?” Belinda asked thoughtfully. “I do like the idea of having more things.”

“That’s everyone’s powers complete,” Humphrey said. “Summoning familiars aside, we’re ready to get down to the real work.”

“The real work?” Neil asked.

“Training,” Jason said, Humphrey nodding his agreement.

“Between us, we have an adventurer and a half worth of abilities to learn. The next few weeks will be strategising, testing, training and then doing it all over again. We won’t just be learning how to use our powers but how to use them as a team. It’s going to take weeks, maybe months to get where we need to be.”

“Months?” Sophie asked.

“It won’t be as tedious as he makes it sounds,” Jason said. “We should all be ready to work hard, though.”

“I had an idea to inspire us a little,” Humphrey said. “There’s a public mirage area in this city. I asked Hester to reserve us a viewing room for this evening. I think seeing what the best of a large city like this can do will show you how far we have to go. If I have anything to say about it, we’ll become better than anyone we see tonight.”

Chapter 185

Magnificent Entity

“Moment of truth,” Jason said. He had drawn out the summoning circle himself, rather than let Clive draw it out with his ritual diagram power. All the materials were laid out; spirit coins, quintessence gems and other magical objects. After sprinkling some powdered lesser magic cores to double check everything was correct, he stood up, preparing to chant the incantation.

“When Gary heard Jason would be getting new familiars,” Humphrey whispered, “he tried to bet me the incantation would be really evil.”

“You didn’t take that bet, did you?” Sophie asked him.

“Gods, no.”

“Do you mind?” Jason asked. “I’m trying to summon an awesome British shadow creature.”

“Sorry,” Humphrey said. “You go ahead.”

“Well, I’m self conscious, now,” Jason said. “You’re all going to interpret the incantation as evil, even when it’s just a normal, harmless incantation.”

“It’ll be fine,” Humphrey said. “We promise to keep an open mind.”

“I don’t,” Neil said.

“Just do it,” Sophie said. “It’s not going to seem any less evil for all the build up.”

Jason groaned, but turned back to his ritual circle and started chanting.

“I call to the realm beyond cold and darkness, where death has no meaning for life has no place. Let mine be the dark beyond darkness, falling on the final road to the end of all things. Let mine be the shadow of death.”

As Jason chanted, dark energy started boiling up to submerge the ritual circle.

“I don’t know what we were worried about,” Neil said. “That didn’t seem at all like he was calling up some all-consuming darkness and that we should kill him to keep it from entering the world.”

“I don’t know that I’d say evil,” Humphrey said with very little conviction.

“You wish you’d taken that bet then?” Sophie asked.

“No, I do not,” Humphrey said.

Jason dropped to his knees, then rolled onto his back. He took out a mana potion and chugged it to assuage the low mana headache suddenly pounding the inside of his skull.

“That was a lot easier than last time,” he said. “Summoning Colin didn’t just drain just my mana, but my health and stamina, too.”

Everyone's gaze turned to the ritual circle where darkness rose up like fire's dark twin, consuming light instead of shedding it, the room seeming to grow dim in spite of the magical glow-stones.

"That's odd," Clive said. "These stones are shielded so as to not affect the ambient magic in the room. Nothing in here should be able to affect them."

From the dark circle of black flame, a figure slowly rose. Nothing more than a silhouette, it seemed ephemeral, yet at the same time imposing. It had the rough shape of a man draped in a cloak. Jason's teammates couldn't help but think of Jason himself, as he looked with his magical cloak completely dimmed.

Suddenly the oppressive feeling drained away. The room lit back up and the black flames vanished, leaving only the figure who looked to be made from darkness itself, his edges blurry, even standing in the light.

"Hello again, Jason Asano."

"Shade," Jason said, a huge grin spreading across his face. "I was hoping it would be you."

"It has been some time since I walked the worlds," Shade said. "You seem likely to see more than most. I should warn you, that the vessels I inhabit now are far less capable than those I was bound to in the astral space."

"Vessels, plural?" Jason asked. He reached out a hand to touch Shade.

-
- Shade (shadow of the Reaper).
 - Familiar (iron rank).

 - Incorporeal.
 - Can occupy up to three shadow bodies.
 - Highly visible in well-lit areas but can move rapidly.
 - Shadow bodies can hide within the shadows of other people. When there is not at least one shadow body attached to the summoner, the summoner has no shadow.
 - Can drain mana by touch. Drained mana can be passed onto anyone with a shadow body hidden within their shadow.
 - While at least one shadow body is hidden within the summoner's shadow, summoner can see and hear through other shadow bodies.
 - Shadow bodies hidden in the summoner's shadow can contain traces of the summoner's presence. One shadow body can eliminate either the caster's heat, scent or sound, with additional shadow bodies eliminating additional factors.

"Shade," Jason said, "I think that will do just fine. Speaking of the astral space, though, did you happen to notice anyone who stayed behind when everyone else left?"

“Yes,” Shade said. “When the trial period ended, the vessels I was inhabiting were dissolved, returning me to the astral. This was the moment the gates closed, therefore those who had not used them remain there still. I am aware of which people they are.”

“You know who stayed behind?” Jason asked. “Actual names?”

“Yes. The powers afforded me by the vessels I inhabited were powerful. All that was said, I heard.”

“That’s pretty amazing,” Jason said and turned to his team. “I’m going to hire one of the Magic Society’s water communication chambers and get that list of names back to Greenstone. In the meantime, you summon up your familiars, Belinda. I’m pretty tired, anyway, after doing mine. I can finish up when you’re done.”

Shade sidled into Jason’s shadow and Jason left without any indication of his new passenger’s presence. The rest of the group cleared away the remnants of his summoning circle and Belinda started setting up her own. Like Jason, she was drawing her own magic diagram, with advice, but not assistance, from Clive.

Belinda’s first summon had a more mystical and less sinister chant than Jason’s. Its appearance was heralded by silver-blue light that filled the room before coalescing over the ritual circle, compressing down until a silver lantern appeared around it. The lantern started floating around the room, bathing it in a cool light.

“It’s pretty,” she said. “I like this much more than some death shadow.”

“Shade was good to us in the astral space,” Sophie said. “He was presumably good to everyone, but I like him.”

Belinda was drained from the summoning, following Jason’s example and drinking a potion to relieve the mental exhaustion. Her familiar was bobbing in the air around her like a puppy seeking attention and she reached out to touch it.

-
- Unnamed (astral lantern).
 - Familiar (iron rank).

 - Reveals nearby hidden enemies.
 - Makes ranged attacks with bolts of disruptive-force, consuming small amounts of core energy.
 - Can intercept and negate magical projectiles. Negating powerful projectiles consumes core energy.
 - Core energy naturally replenishes over time. Summoner can use mana to restore core energy.
 - Familiar can be subsumed into the caster’s eyes. When it has done so, the summoner can see hidden enemies and consume mana to make disruptive-force beam attacks from her eyes.
-

"You need a need a name, little guy," Belinda said. "Floaty? Sparkles?"

"That's terrible," Sophie said.

"You have a better idea?" Belinda asked.

Sophie thought it over as she looked at the silver lantern with the silver-blue light.

"How about Shimmer?" she said.

"I like that," Humphrey said.

"That is pretty good," Belinda said, then turned to her familiar. "What do you think? Do you like Shimmer?"

The lantern waggled side to side in the air.

"Does anyone know if that means yes?" Belinda asked.

Jason only returned once Belinda had recovered and mostly laid out her next ritual circle.

"Since it wasn't a scheduled message," Jason said, "I had to wait for them to go get someone. I wasn't just going to drop that information to anyone, so I spoke to Rufus."

"That extra time would have been expensive."

"Rufus said he'd get the Adventure Society to pony up for it."

"Pony?"

"It's like a small horse."

"Those are the one-headed heidels, right?"

"Yeah, except with silky hair instead of creepy reptile scales."

"And what does they have to with paying for things?"

"Nothing."

"Then why did you say it?"

"Because language is weird."

"You know, you could make more of an effort to be understood through your translation power."

"Your Mum understands me."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Humphrey asked.

Jason groaned.

"Sometimes trying to aggravate people in this world only aggravates me," he complained, then levelled a suspicious gaze at Humphrey. "Were you being deliberately obtuse just to get under my skin?"

A grin teased the corners of Humphrey's mouth.

"You shouldn't be talking about my mother."

"That's true," Jason said. "That is not wrath I'd be looking to suffer."

Belinda completed her ritual and summoned her other familiar. Unlike the previous two, it was not foreshadowed by phenomena, suddenly appearing out of nowhere. It was a strange, flickering entity, skipping around the room without passing through the intervening space. Its form constantly shifted, changing with each flickering teleport. It first appeared with Belinda's form, then Humphrey's, then Clive's. Then it was a strange amalgam of Sophie and Neil, but only for a moment as the changes continued. Sometimes it would replicate a member of the group, other times, melding two or more forms together in a bizarre gestalt. It never took any kind of form of its own.

It stilled slightly, holding in place as Belinda approached it but still flickering, like a television with bad reception. She reached out and touched it.

-
- Unnamed (echo spirit).
 - Familiar (iron rank).

 - Incorporeal.
 - Can mimic the form of enemies or allies.
 - Can switch-teleport with mimicked allies.
 - Can mirror the mimicked ally's movements and attacks, but inflicts no damage or other effects.
 - When subsumed into the summoner's aura, the summoner can manipulate their own aura, projecting false traits or mimicking the aura of others.
-

"It's deception based," she said. "It works like Humphrey's new power to make an illusionary double."

"It'll be interesting to see if it doubles Humphrey's illusionary double," Jason said. "That would make him almost impossible to defend against, short of running away."

Once again Belinda needed to pick out a name. She ultimately accepted Jason's suggestion of Gemini.

"It means twins in a language from my world," he explained.

That left Jason's final familiar, which he started setting up for.

"That last incantation was pretty bad," Neil said. "This one is called an avatar of doom, though. Who's going to bet which incantation is more evil?"

"Seriously?" Jason asked, not looking up from his task.

"I'll take avatar of doom," Sophie said. "It has to be worse."

"I don't know," Belinda said. "That whole bit about the end of all things in the last one was pretty bad. I'll bet on the shadow incantation."

"Yes, I'll take the shadow familiar as well," Clive said.

"Oh, come on, Clive," Jason said. "You too?"

“What about you, Humphrey?” Belinda asked.

“No, he’s the judge,” Neil said. “He has to be objective, so I’ll round out the numbers and pick the new one as worse.”

“I should kick you all out and do this alone.”

Belinda and Sophie immediately booed him, Neil joining in as well. He turned around to glare at them as Humphrey and Clive shrugged their shoulders, helplessly. Jason shook his head and ignored them until he was done.

“We didn’t decide what we were betting for,” Belinda said.

“The losers buy everyone’s snacks at the mirage chamber tonight,” Neil said.

“That’s reasonable,” Clive said.

“Really, Clive?” Jason asked.

“You don’t get to complain,” Neil said. “Your snacks get bought for you either way.”

“My issues aren’t snack-related,” Jason said.

“Maybe just get it done and out of the way?” Humphrey suggested.

“You’re just in it because your snacks are guaranteed, too.”

Scowling, Jason turned back to his ritual circle and started chanting.

“When worlds end, you are the arbiter. When gods fall, you are the instrument. Herald of annihilation, come forth and be my harbinger. I have doom to bring.”

At first, it seemed like nothing was happening. Neil had just opened his mouth to accuse Jason of getting it wrong when the glow stones lighting the room started flickering.

“That really shouldn’t be happening,” Clive said.

The glow stones started going out, one by one, until the room was plunged into darkness. Then they all flared up at once, flooding the room with glare before they started shattering, stone fragments falling into the crystal that should have shielded them from anything in the room.

After the blinding brightness, the dark seemed especially deep. As they looked around, a speck of orange light appeared, floating over the circle. It expanded, swirling in the dark like a nebula in the void of space. The orange was joined by blue and soon they could see the expanding colours take the shape of an orange eye with a vibrant blue iris.

The darkness around the nebula eye started to coalesce, taking on physical substance the way Jason’s conjured cloak did. It even took on the form of a cloak, draping around the nebula eye, which floated where the torso would be. Two orbs manifested around the cloak, themselves smaller versions of the eye. One was blue in orange, the other, orange in blue. They drifted through the air, slowly circling the cloak like guardians.

Jason's teammates had been poised to mock the incantation but were transfixed by the beauty of the familiar. In the darkness left from the shattered glow stones, the eye nebula and the floating orbs were the only sources of light.

"Ah, crap," Jason said. "I'm going to be a chuuni forever."

"Hey, Clive," Neil said.

"Uh, yeah?" Clive said.

"I'm guessing that wasn't meant to happen either."

"No, it was not," Clive said, his normal inquisitiveness reasserting itself as he moved to stand next to Jason and look at the new familiar.

"It's curious that the familiars are both reflective of your appearance," Clive observed. "Your appearance while wearing your cloak, anyway. I did notice that Shade looks somewhat different than he did in the astral space. There, his silhouette was closer to a person's form, instead of the cloak shape he inhabits now."

"Can you speak?" Jason asked the familiar. The shadowy cowl shook its empty non-head slowly, an ominous gesture in the light coming from its own body. Its cloak shape was dominated by the eye, but the rest of the space in the cloak was slowly being occupied by what looked like a less formed nebula, with shades of red, green purple and other colours that shifted like a rainbow tide.

"You can understand me, though, that's good," Jason said. "Let's try this: Make the orb that's blue on the outside glow slightly brighter for yes and the one that's orange on the outside for no. Can you do that?"

The blue orb glowed brighter.

"Nice. This will work out just fine."

He reached out to touch the avatar, his hand getting a strange tingle as it met the light of the nebula eye.

-
- Unnamed (avatar of doom).
 - Familiar (iron rank).

 - Incorporeal.
 - Each orb can make sustained beam attacks. One orb inflicts disruptive-force damage, the other, resonating-force damage.
 - Enemies damaged by the avatar are afflicted with [Vulnerable]. Sustained beam damage will cause additional instances to be accrued.
 - The avatar's normal movement is slow but it can make rapid energy dashes, inflicting disruptive-force damage on enemies in the path of the dash. Orbs do not attack during the dash.
 - Can be subsumed into the summoner's aura, making the summoner's aura much harder to detect and read.

- [Vulnerable] (affliction, unholy, stacking): All resistances are reduced. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Consumed to cleanse instances of [Resistant] on a 1:1 basis.
-

“No name, then?”

Orange orb.

“Do you want one?”

Blue orb.

“Yeah, you should have one. I can’t be all ‘hey, Avatar of Doom, do you want a sausage?’ That would be absurd.”

“It doesn’t look like it’s big on sausages,” Belinda said.

“You have to give it a majestic name,” Neil said. “Even I’m willing to acknowledge that is a magnificent entity.”

Jason rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “I’m going to call you... Gordon.”

“What?”

“No!”

“You can’t call it that!”

“What do you say, Gordon?” Jason asked. “Want to go take a look at the mirage arena?”

Blue orb.

Chapter 186

I Try to Find the Truth, But That's Your Hiding Place

The city of Jayapura featured a vast mirage chamber complex that was larger and more sophisticated than the Geller family's private chamber. The higher magical density of Jayapura meant that more advanced magical effects could be used and supported. This included potent dimensional magic that allowed the replication of vast spaces, as well as multiple, concurrently-operating chambers in the same complex.

In addition to hiring out spaces for training, it was the premier entertainment space in the city. Essence users would pit themselves against one another or illusionary challenges, all for the entertainment of a paying audience. This produced more than enough funding for the frequent upgrades and regular maintenance required of a top-tier facility.

The organisation that owned and operated the chamber had close ties with the Magic Society, Adventure Society and local government. Important for both the amenities and the revenue it provided the city, the Mirage Chamber Association enjoyed significant power and influence within Jayapura.

Rather than a dome, the mirage chamber was a flat, circular building at the edge of the Mystic Quarter. Very large, it spilled into the adjacent theatre district, which was appropriate enough. Most people came looking for entertainment, rather than to use the facilities for themselves.

"There are whole essence user teams who never become adventurers," Hester explained as they arrived. She had met up with them after they were done at the Magic Society, leading them to the site of their evening's entertainment. They joined the crowd likewise heading in through the large public entrances.

"They make all their money here in the arena, and use monster cores to rank up."

"They can make enough money for that?" Belinda asked.

"They have competition leagues here at the arena," Hester explained. "Teams facing off against one another all year, leading up to the grand championships. There are two leagues a year, in silver, bronze and iron divisions. Obviously, silver is the big draw, with the largest following and the biggest prizes."

"No gold division?" Neil asked.

"Even with the money running through here, getting to gold rank using monster cores is a tough ask," Hester said. "They just don't have the numbers to make a gold division,

which is why the handful of professionals successful enough stop using cores before they hit gold. Being at the peak of silver keeps them at the top of their game.”

“And because they used monster cores to get there,” Jason realised, “they’re well-past their abilities advancing through regular use and training.”

“Exactly,” Hester said. “They keep going until silver-rank longevity is no longer enough, at which point they retire and make their way to gold for the extended life span. This whole place is run by former participants who are all gold rank, now.”

“Is this common practice in big cities?” Jason asked.

“It is,” Humphrey said. “I’ve travelled to a number of large cities and seen the same thing in each.”

“Is it all PvP, or do they mix it up?” Jason asked.

“PvP?” Hester asked.

“Hot adventurer-on-adventurer action,” Jason clarified.

“There are three events, but the big one is the team-against-team arena battles,” Hester said. “They’re fast and exciting, with plenty of powers flying around. There’s also monster hunts, but they aren’t as popular. That tends to bring in competitors who are also active adventurers, but people prefer to see people go up against one another. Lastly is team conflict again, but in larger, more complex environments, with roaming monsters. It’s a slower, more complicated event that doesn’t interest the public as much. It mostly gets attention from the professional adventurer crowd.”

They went inside with the crowd but instead of the large viewing rooms for the general public, a member of the area staff took them upstairs to a private viewing box. It was a large lounge, with a front wall made of dark, impenetrable glass. Luxurious chairs and couches were arrayed in front of it and several low tables were filled with food and drinks.

“Aside from the more comfortable environs,” the staff member explained, “these private rooms differ from the public areas in that you can choose what you want to be looking at any given time. Any event, any division, any match, at your leisure. The projector is controlled from the tablet on the table there, which can also be used to order any food or drink you might want from our comprehensive selection and it will be brought right up.”

“Who do we pay for the snacks?” Neil asked her.

“All costs are included with the room,” the attendant told him.

“Then how are Clive and Belinda going to pay for them?”

“Us?” Belinda asked.

“Clearly you lost the bet,” Neil said.

“No way,” Belinda argued. “‘Mine is the shadow of death’ is way worse than the other chant.”

“You’re clearly wrong. The other one talked about killing gods. Gods!”

“It didn’t mention doing it personally. Don’t forget about that ‘final road to the end of all things’ bit.”

Clive went up to reassure the attendant, who was starting to look a little nervous.

“Don’t worry,” Clive assured her. “They’re just talking about our friend’s new familiars. We’ll be fine here; you can go.”

“Honestly,” Sophie said as she left, “The blood-drinking apocalypse beast is more sinister than either of them. I bet that incantation was the worst of the lot...”

The attendant hurried out, closing the door behind her.

“Am I mistaken,” Neil said, his eyes glued to the viewing screen, “or are these people really good. As in, really, really good.”

“They’re good,” Humphrey confirmed.

They were watching one of the iron-rank monster-hunt events, where teams would take turns hunting identical monsters in identical circumstances and be judged on their performance.

“How do you think we would stack-up against teams like this?” Clive asked.

“Poorly,” Jason said. “These people are at the top of their game in a city with a lot of game to climb over to get there. They’re obviously practised and work effectively together. My guess would be that they’re all closing in on bronze rank.”

“They are,” Hester said. “These are the best Jayapura has to offer and they are, indeed, closing in on bronze rank.”

“We’ll get there,” Humphrey said. “Training and experience, that’s all it is.”

“The only people on our team operating at this level right now,” Jason said, “are Humphrey and Neil. The rest of us have our strengths, but also critical flaws. Clive has been out of the game a long time and his power set is all about judging the circumstances and picking his moments. It’s the kind of thing only experience can improve. The same goes for Belinda but even more so, given she’s been an essence user for about an hour. She isn’t even ready for the Adventure Society field test.”

“We’ll get you there, Lindy,” Sophie assured her friend.

“Yes, we will,” Jason said. “Wexler has skills to match anyone out there but has too many abilities she hasn’t had a chance to get a handle on, yet. The same is true for all of

us, to a degree. As for me, my power set doesn't give me the margin of error Humphrey's or Neil's do, with armour and self-shields. I can be dropped in one hit if I get blind-sided and I've only been in this world half a year. I still have a lot of blind spots where the rest of you would see danger coming."

"So, all those people who went into the astral space with us," Clive said. "They were all this good?"

"No," Hester said. "These people we're watching today have already fulfilled whatever potential they had. When I was selecting people for the Reaper trials, Emir had me looking at unfulfilled potential. These people here are good, but the people who went through the trials have at least the potential to be as good or better."

"And we beat them all," Sophie said with satisfaction.

"That was luck," Jason said. "Sigrid was almost as fast, and she wasn't the only one to jump through that final ring."

"You never told us what you saw, there at the end," Clive said.

"Nor should he," Hester said, her voice full of warning. "I checked-in with Emir, today, and there has been an unusual development. One of the others who reached that final stage has gone missing, along with everyone who accompanied them to Greenstone. Gone without a trace, leaving all their possessions behind."

"Some secrets are best left dead and buried," Jason said, "lest you be buried with them. I imagine that some of you will speculate as to the meaning of what happened. Keep that speculation to yourself, for all our sakes."

"That mirrors the advice Emir asked me to impart," Hester said. "I was going to wait until after we returned for the evening to tell you, but since the topic came up it seemed appropriate."

Jason was frustrated at having no one to discuss it with, if only to act as a sounding board. As the others continued to watch the viewing screen, his mind was consumed with possibilities. If the Order of the Reaper wanted to remain secret, why would they act so blatantly? Were they preparing for a grand reappearance or were they not involved at all? If Jason wanted to kill someone who had also reached that secret last stage, the Order of the Reaper would make an intimidating, if risky patsy.

He reflected again on how in this world, the answer to every question and the solution to every problem was the same: get stronger. He had been putting off his final awakening stones for the Reaper trials and while he couldn't be sure if the legendary stones he acquired were worth the delay, he suspected his new familiars were formidable.

He could feel them in his shadow and his aura, much as he could feel his first familiar inside his blood. They felt like power, waiting to be unleashed, and it was only the beginning. While Jason was still iron-rank, he still felt within the realms of a normal human, whatever Clive said about the strange inner workings of his body. Bronze-rank was the threshold beyond which the ordinary was left behind, surpassing even the most exceptional normal person.

The very concept of reaching those levels was bizarre and exciting. Stronger than an Olympic power-lifter and more agile than an Olympic gymnast at the same time. His perception was linked to his spirit attribute, which left him wondering what that would mean. Telescopic vision? Seeing the infrared spectrum, or hearing ultrasonic sounds?

In a world of monsters, magic, adventurers and cultists, it somehow was all acceptable. When considered within the context of his own world, it suddenly became impossible and absurd. Was there really a place for him there, anymore? Did he want it? Absently he took out the world-phoenix token, turning it over in his hands.

Knowledge told him it would take him home, but could he trust the words of the goddess? It looked very much like the Reaper token he had already used. Would it trigger another gift evolution? How was he meant to use it? The goddess told him that he lacked the faith in magic. Jason was no longer an atheist but that did not mean he was willing to jump into faith. He liked believing in things for good reason.

Sophie got up from her chair to grab some food and spotted Jason, uncharacteristically quiet as he looked at something in his hands. She crashed down next to him on the couch he was using.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“I’m not sure,” Jason said, putting the tablet away. “The future, maybe.”

The team were making their way through the streets of Jayapura, back toward Tilly’s nondescript tattoo parlour. As they floated along on their discs, the topic of discussion was postulation on the nature of Jason’s personal crest.

“I bet it’s just a picture of him with an idiotic grin and a sandwich,” Neil said.

“I think it’ll be something intimidating,” Clive said. “Look at his familiars. It’ll be all dark and spooky.”

“How is Jason in any way intimidating?” Neil asked.

“Try fighting him,” Sophie said. “I’m the only one here who’s done it for real. I had a well-executed plan, meticulous preparation and, as it turned out, a silver-ranker intervening on my behalf. Even then, it took a priest of the god of healing and an alchemist healer

working together to keep me alive and he wasn't even trying to kill me. He makes people like you think he's an idiot because otherwise, they'd run for the hills."

"She exaggerates," Jason said. "I'm with Neil. I think it's going to be sandwich-related."

"What about you, Humphrey?" Clive asked. "You've known him longer than the rest of us."

"I don't know what his crest will be," Humphrey said. "I suppose I can say what I want it to be."

The others looked over at Humphrey, their interest piqued. Neil turned his eyes back to where he was going, though, when he almost drove his disc into a wall.

"What do you mean?" Sophie asked, looking between Humphrey and Jason. Humphrey's expression was sober and thoughtful, Jason's blank and unreadable. He had mostly stayed quiet during their guessing game.

"Jason is good at putting on masks to get what he wants," Humphrey said. "He becomes what he needs to be to provoke the response he's looking for, whether it's absurd buffoon, or callous killer. I've seen him be friendly and approachable with ordinary people, sharp and provoking toward aristocrats. He'll stare down silver-rankers and capitulate to his landlady. I'd like to see who he is under all that. Which parts of what he shows us is really who he is."

The others all looked at Jason, who remained impassively silent.

"Damn," Neil said. "That got heavy fast."

The rest of the trip took place in awkward silence. When they reached the tattoo shop, Tilly took in the strange air over them and nodded toward the back room without saying anything.

Jason stripped off his shirt as Tilly adjusted the chair so she could work on his back. She took out a series of pots, some of which were faintly glowing, and set them out on a table, along with a set of brushes.

"You have the crest?"

Jason took the immortal crest out from his inventory. Tilly took a stick of chalk from her pocket, scrawling some symbols on it as Jason held it in place. Then she ushered him onto the chair, telling him to hold it to his chest. He did so, placing it over the sigil of his magic tattoo.

Tilly began drawing an intricate magical diagram on Jason's back, using the brushes and paint she had set out. She would stop frequently, her face caught up in thought as if pondering what to do next. Sometimes she would make slow progress, a minute or more

passing between strokes of the brush. Other times would be a fury of activity as she wildly applied whole sections, her seeming haste having no ill-effect on her precision.

Her brushes dipped into one pot after another as every part of Jason's back was filled with tiny, precise lines and sigils. The diagram was drawn out in ordinary black, vibrant blue, shimmering silver and bright gold. Finally, she put down her brush and wheeled the table away, pulling up another one. She took out a rolled-up cloth and unfurled it on the table, revealing a dazzling array of needles. Some were silver, others, black, green, red and gold. She started pulling them out and poking them into Jason's back, one after another. By the time she was done, Jason's back was a forest of metal, the elaborate diagram completely obscured.

She moved away from the chair, taking out a tarp and setting it on the workshop floor.

"Get up and go stand on that," she instructed and Jason did so.

"Now we wait," she said.

They all stood in silence, Jason's eyes glued to the floor. Sophie and Humphrey had their gazes locked on Jason while the others shared awkward glances. Just as the silence grew so heavy it felt like someone had to say something, there was a dull sound as a needle fell from Jason's back and onto the tarp. It was followed by a second, third, rapidly increasing until they started cascading from his back to form a pile around his feet.

No one said anything for a moment.

"Well?" Neil asked, breaking the silence. "Turn around and let us see."

"He sees first," Tilly said, her tone brooking no dissent. She took a sheet of dark glass the size of a large book, holding it behind Jason's back for a moment, then passing to Jason to look at. He held the glass in his hands, staring for a long time at the image it had recorded from his back. Finally he nodded, handing the glass back to Tilly.

"It's a good one," she said, "but you don't have to show them. You don't have to show anyone, if you don't want."

"It's fine," Jason said, stepping carefully out of the needles at his feet. Then he turned around, allowing the others to see.

On his back was the image of a dark, empty cloak, not unlike his new familiar, Gordon. Around the cloak was a dark sky full of silver stars. Inside the cloak was an open blue sky, with a golden sun right where Gordon's nebula eye was located, right in the middle of the chest.

"Is it shining?" Clive asked, squinting his eyes. Tilly walked over to the wall, tapping a crystal. Shutters came down over the windows and the glow-stones in the workshop dimmed to nothing. In the darkness, the only light was the faint glow of the sun and stars

on Jason's back. They softly illuminated his new crest, the silver stars highlighting the dark sky and the gold light of the sun lighting up the bright portion in the middle.

"It looks like the day, hidden in the night," Humphrey said.

"Yep," Sophie said. "That's going to get you laid, alright."

Chapter 187

The Last Reward

In the early morning, Jason stood at the edge of a platform in the underground grotto, looking out to the cave entrance and the ocean beyond. Daylight was yet to penetrate the west-facing cave and the illumination was still provided by the colourful glow-stones shining from beneath the water.

“It’s only been a couple of days, but I’m going to miss this,” Jason said.

“It definitely beats hiding out in the back of a disused boat warehouse,” Sophie said, emerging from her own room to join him in leaning on the rail.

“Still,” Jason said, pushing himself off the railing. “There’s a world of wonders waiting out there for us. Shall we go see if we can find it?”

“Sure,” Sophie said, giving him a smile.

As they made their way up the spiral staircase, Jason happily reflected on Sophie finally not viewing any approach as some kind of attack. Reaching the top, an open terrace looking out over the cliff face to the ocean, Humphrey and Clive were already waiting for them.

“Ever since we haven’t been actively hunted,” Sophie said, “Lindy has taken to sleeping in.”

“Very sensible,” Neil said, emerging from the main house. “I know Humphrey has been planning dawn to dusk training for when we get back, so this might be our last lazy morning for a while.”

“Night training as well,” Humphrey said, not denying it. “We can’t be ready for every circumstance, but we can try.”

Belinda and Hester appeared together.

“Thank you for the generous hospitality,” Jason said. “Especially for those of us who haven’t left Greenstone before, this was a great experience.”

The time they had spent awakening abilities, summoning familiars and getting tattoos had only been a portion of their several days in Jayapura. They had also taken in the city, visiting markets and the city’s various places of interest. New customs, new food. New sights and sounds, tastes and smells.

Jason had always wanted to travel, until circumstances derailed his life plans. Instead of finishing university he had taken a job in retail and barely travelled beyond a few city blocks. More and more, his new life had him reflecting on his old one.

Hester opened up a portal and they stepped through, arriving at the district of the Island called Marina North. Jason knew it quite well, having travelled through it frequently. It contained the bridge he most often used to cross between Old City and the Island, and was the place he first met – and was kicked in the face by – Sophie.

They were at one of the marinas for which the district was named. The entire east side of the island was lined with marinas, holding the private watercraft of the city's elite. Trade shipping was restricted to the sprawling port on the Old City side, with the Island serving as a vast breakwater.

Emir was waiting for them, along with Constance. They were in an open area beside the main marina building, the area pleasantly laid out with subdued green and yellow pavers.

"Excellent," he greeted as they arrived. "I hope you had a nice trip home, Hester. I need to put my logistics coordinator to work."

"Of course," Hester said amenably.

"Constance has the details," Emir said. "She can fill you in while I attend to Jason. Are you ready for your cloud...well, not palace, yet."

"I definitely am," Jason said.

"My cloud palace is still at the lake, since my people are now largely concerned with studying the underwater complex. I've taken the liberty of renting marina space for you to use, by which I mean I had Constance do it. She has all the paperwork, so see her about all that after. It's nothing you can't afford."

Emir reached into his jacket and pulled a large flask from the dimensional space within. It was round, with a cylindrical neck, identical to the one that Emir used for his own cloud palace. Through the glass they could see energy swirling inside, a vortex of blue and white. He handed the bottle to Jason, who immediately dropped what turned out to be the profoundly heavy object.

"Oh, right," Emir said. "I forgot how weak iron-rankers are."

"Did I break it?" Jason asked in horror, looking down at the bottle laying on the stone pavers.

"Don't worry about that," Emir said, gesturing to the stone, three storey building beside them. "You could drop this building on that bottle and it wouldn't get so much as a scratch."

He took out a notebook, thumbing through pages until he found what he was after and passed it over to Clive.

“Can you knock that one out for me?” Emir asked. “It might be a little tricky.” Clive only spent a moment glancing over notes before he started drawing out a ritual circle using his power. Passers-by looked over in curiosity as golden light traced out a magic diagram. When he was done, Emir picked up the bottle and carried it into the middle of the circle, directing Jason to join him.

“You won’t need to enact the ritual, Clive,” Emir said. “Jason just needs to drop a little blood into the bottle. Just a few drops will do it.”

Emir took the glass stopper out of the bottle and Jason nicked a finger with the blade under his wristband. He kept it there even when not wearing his combat gear in case he needed to call out Colin in a pinch.

The droplets of blood fell into the bottle and Emir stoppered it again as the contents swirled about wildly. Despite only losing a few drops of blood, Jason felt suddenly drained. The mana and stamina bars at the periphery of his vision emptied and he staggered before righting himself.

-
- You have bound [Cloud Flask] to you.
 - [Cloud Flask] is currently iron rank.
 - You can summon, dismiss and alter the iron-rank options of your [Cloud Flask].
-

After Jason tipped mana and stamina potions down his throat, Emir held out the flask for Jason to take.

“That didn’t go so well last time,” Jason said, but took the proffered bottle, nonetheless. To his surprise, the bottle now was so light as to be almost weightless. He could feel a connection to the energy inside it, not dissimilar to the sense of his familiars he had while they were subsumed within his body.

Item: [Cloud Flask] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

- This item is bound to you and cannot be used by anyone else.
 - Use the energies within the cloud flask to create buildings and vehicles made of clouds. Available forms are restricted by rank.
 - Items contained within the cloud construct when it is returned to the flask are stored in a dimensional space and cannot be recovered until another cloud construct is formed.
 - Available forms (iron rank): Cloud house (grand), cloud house (adaptive).
-

“Soul-bound items are rare, even compared to other growth items,” Clive said. “Ten years in the Magic Society and this is only the third one I’ve seen. The advancement requirements are usually quite prohibitive.”

Jason looked over the growth requirements.

-
- 1000 [Air Quintessence (bronze)].
 - 1000 [Water Quintessence (bronze)].
 - 200 [Dimension Quintessence (bronze)].
 - 10,000 [Bronze Spirit Coins]
-

“Oh, that’s a lot,” Jason said. “Really, a lot.”

“Not to worry,” Emir said. “I have everything you need to upgrade it to bronze. You can grab it all next time you’re in the cloud palace. After that, you’re in charge of your own supplies, though.”

“Thank you,” Jason said gratefully. “That’s very generous.”

“I think it’s time to try it out,” Emir said. He led the group to find the right pier, where he had leased three adjacent berths to make sure Jason had the room he needed.

“So, how does it work?” Jason asked. “Do I just open the bottle?”

“That’s the first step,” Emir said. “Do that now.”

Jason opened the bottle and mist flowed out, shifting in colour as it formed a small image of a house in the air. It looked like a small manor, in the sunset colours they all recognised from the cloud palace.

“Here you can choose which configuration of house you want to use,” Emir told him. “What you’re looking at now is the grand form. Put your hand into the image and turn it.”

Jason did as instructed and the image changed, from a manor to a large house boat.

“That’s the adaptive form,” Emir explained. “It won’t be as large as the grand form but it will fit into its surroundings much better, even camouflaging itself. Good for unusual environments or when you don’t want to make a spectacle. Once I used the adaptive form of the palace in a forest and got a series of tree-houses connected by swinging bridges. It was amazing.”

“How do I set it off?” Jason asked.

“Once you’ve picked your form,” Emir said, “concentrate on where you want it to go and just give it a push.”

Jason left the small image in the form of a houseboat and shoved it with his hand. The image broke apart as fog started pouring out of the bottle and into the empty space along the marina dock. They watched as the fog slowly took the form of a large houseboat,

with three imposing storeys and clearly too ponderous to move. It took some ten minutes to achieve its final shape, after which the cloud-stuff from which it was constructed started taking on the look of painted wood until it was indistinguishable from an actual wooden houseboat.

“I would have picked you for going with the grand version,” Emir said. “What’s the point of having a cloud palace if no one knows about it?”

“Enjoying it for yourself,” Jason said. “I’m not gold rank, Emir. I have to be judicious about how and when I make a spectacle of myself.”

“You do?” Clive asked.

“It seems more like you’re making it up as you go along,” Neil said.

“Of course I am,” Jason said. “But when it works out, you have to tell everyone that you planned it all along.”

Emir burst out laughing. “Exactly right.”

They went aboard, discovering that the houseboat’s facade was just that, with the interior being constructed from the familiar cloud-stuff. They toured around, discovering several bedrooms, two entertaining decks and a formidable kitchen.

“Every cloud building has certain similarities,” Emir explained as they explored. “They all have their own nuances, however, reflective of their owners. My houses, for example, never have kitchens in them.”

“That’s actually common with soul-bound items,” Clive said. “No magic item can match the potential contained within a soul, so items connected to one tend to take on it’s properties. This becomes more pronounced with growth items as they advance in rank.”

“So, you could use a person’s soul-bound items to judge their true nature,” Humphrey said.

“Oh, yes,” Clive said. “If you meet someone who seems like a good person but has a hideous and twisted soul-bound item, stay clear. Compare that to Emir’s cloud palace, which is so obviously a reflection of him. Outrageously grandiose, yet welcoming and beautiful.”

“Clive,” Emir said warmly. “That may be the nicest thing anyone has ever said about me. Speaking of revealing the true nature, though, Hester said you were getting a personal crest, Jason. I have to admit to being curious.”

“It’s just me eating a sandwich with a big stupid grin,” Jason said. “It’s kind of embarrassing, to be honest.”

Emir gave Jason a sceptical look but didn’t challenge his assertion.

“You should be careful not to rely on the security of this cloud house,” Emir warned, turning the subject back to Jason’s new abode. “Yours is only iron rank, so a bronze-ranker could force their way in given enough time. With the right skill set, someone could even sneak their way inside. I imagine that even Clive and Belinda could do just that, if they put their heads together. As it ranks up you’ll find it becomes increasingly more resistant to all forms of trespass.

Jason discovered, as they roamed around, that he was quickly gaining a sense for the houseboat, even able to sense the people inside. Emir walked Jason through the various functions, such as taking aura imprints to allow others to have various permissions.

“There are some other things that I’ve figured out from using my own cloud flask,” Emir said, giving Jason the notebook he had handed to Clive, earlier. “Everything I’ve learned is collected here. I direct your attention especially to the section on plants, which is the product of many years of trial and error.”

“Thank you, Emir,” Jason said, taking the notebook.

“I’m glad it was you,” Emir said, “although, I will admit to being a little surprised. You had some impressive competition, which you apparently made friends with. The boats have left already, but several notable groups stayed behind and will have to make their own arrangements. They’ve been waiting for you to get back.”

“It sounds like a housewarming party is in order,” Jason said. ‘I’ll have to get some supplies.”

“Nothing too raucous,” Humphrey said. “Tomorrow, we start training in earnest.”

“We also have to sort out living arrangements,” Jason said. “With the cloud palace off at Sky Scar Lake, you and Lindy, Wexler, should probably shack up here. Unless you want to make your own arrangements.”

“And give up cloud beds?” Belinda said. “No chance.”

“There’s about eight bedrooms in here,” Jason said. “Any of the rest of you are welcome to join them. It could be good for team building.”

“I’ll take you up on that,” Clive said. “I’ve been living in the Magic Society dorm for years.”

“That’s a great idea,” Humphrey said. “We can regulate our training so much better if we’re all together.”

Neil groaned. “You’re really going to let Humphrey push us through training every waking minute?”

“You say that,” Jason said, “but you train as hard as anyone. You can act as disaffected all you like, but we all know how driven you are.”

“And what happens when Humphrey starts planning the meals for maximum effectiveness?” Neil asked.

Jason’s eye’s went wide.

“Now that I think about it,” he said, “maintaining a respectful separation may be what’s best for the team.”

Chapter 188

Impossible Wasn't Enough

In a training hall within the Adventure Society campus, Prince Valdis was squaring off against Rufus. Both held training swords that would leave a painful sting but not inflict any permanent damage.

Valdis moved swiftly, rushing around Rufus while delivering a flurry of rapid but precise strikes. Rufus was more languid, moving with slow, consistent steps as he deflected every attack with almost dismissive ease. He remained on the defensive yet never seemed pressured, casually throwing out the occasional attack to disrupt Valdis' rhythm.

By the time their practice session was done, Valdis was laying in a sweating heap as Rufus wiped down the swords and returned them to the rack on the wall.

"You're not too bad," Rufus said. "Once you stop trying to be my grandfather and start fighting your own way, you might actually become good."

"Thank you for doing this," Valdis said, pushing himself to his feet.

"Of course," Rufus said. "I spoke to my grandfather the other day through a water speaking chamber and he expressed his respect for your father. Have you seen the speaking chambers they have here?"

"Yes, I used one to tell my mother that my team would be staying in Greenstone for a while. They have impressive chambers here for such an out of the way city."

"I've found this city to be full of surprises," Rufus said.

"I should have suspected as much from the place that produced the Geller family," Valdis said. "Is it true your academy is establishing an annex here?"

"It is," Rufus said. "It's my personal project, but my attention has been drawn away by other matters."

"This business with the astral spaces is certainly concerning," Valdis said. "Do you think this cult used the Reaper trials to place people inside the astral space?"

"Almost certainly," Rufus said. "Emir's people are seeing if getting inside is any more feasible now the trials are completed."

Valdis walked over to the side of the room, taking a stamina potion from his dimensional bag and drinking it.

"Jason Asano is a friend of yours, right?" Valdis asked. "Did you imagine he would be the one who succeeded in the trials?"

"Yes," Rufus said.

“Really? I never saw him in action during the trials but I’ve seen some recordings since. He’s coming along with his skills and mastering his power set, but there were dozens of people participating with better training, superior skills and greater mastery of their abilities.”

Rufus chuckled.

“The day I met Jason I learned that something being impossible wasn’t enough to stop him. My grandfather has a lot of sayings about adventurers and I find Jason tends to remind me of them. I’m guessing your father has a few sayings of his own.”

Valdis laughed.

“More than a few.”

“Well,” Rufus said, “you wondered how someone with less skill and less training could beat out all these people like you. What would your father say?”

Valdis thought Rufus question over for a moment.

“One of my father’s sayings,” he said, finally, “is that mastering your powers can make you good adventurer, but only a good one. To be a great adventurer, you have to master destiny.”

“That’s a little overdramatic, but a good enough point,” Rufus said. “Around half a year ago, I was in as bad a situation as I’ve ever been in. I thought of this place as an isolated backwater and underestimated the dangers. I let my team get ambushed and we were caged up with suppression collars, waiting to be killed. I was certain we were going to die.”

“Obviously that didn’t happen,” Valdis said.

“No,” Rufus said. “That was when I met Jason. He was in a worse situation than we were. He had only been in our world a matter of hours and had no idea of what was going on. He came from a world with no magic, no monsters, no essences. I had to tell him what a spirit coin was. He was caged up with us, no suppression collar but his only essence abilities were falling slowly and seeing in the dark.”

“He helped you escape?”

“Helped? He broke out and released us, only for us to confront the bronze-rankers who caught us and get punished because we still had the suppression collars. So Jason stepped in. Two essence abilities against two bronze-rankers, but they’re dead and we’re here.”

“How?”

“Exactly how you’d expect: by talking a lot of nonsense. Great adventurers are the ones who find their skills and powers aren’t enough and they win anyway. That’s why I wasn’t surprised when Jason was the one who grabbed the scythe.”

“You know, someone from my team almost beat him to it.”

“Then make sure they stay on your team.”

Valdis thanked Rufus again and went for the shower room, while Rufus left. On his way out of the building, a voice came from a shadow.

“A word, please, Mr Remore.”

Rufus moved closer.

“Mr Dorgan,” Rufus said. “I was beginning to wonder if I would hear from you again.”

“I think we both know the kind of risks involved in what you’ve asked of me,” Dorgan said. “I don’t even trust messengers with this information.”

Rufus’ gaze grew sharp. “You have something?”

“Yes.”

“Should we be talking here?” Rufus asked.

“Don’t forget who my daughter is,” Dorgan said. “This seems like a casual conversation, but no small effort has been made to keep it and my presence here private. The closest set of ears is your young prince friend, who is being watched.”

“What do you have?” Rufus asked.

“I told you last time we met that someone was covering up every trace. You told me who, which gave me something to work with, but looking into a church’s activities is delicate business. Normally bribes and blackmail are reliable tools, but people get real committed when religion gets involved. You never know when zeal is going to throw good sense out the window, especially with the church of Purity.”

“I understand.”

“Once the Mercer’s went crazy and started rooting everything out, everything changed. These cultist pricks started pulling everything out of the city and mistakes were made. Making the most of other’s mistakes is what I do best. I managed to track some supplies that were taken out of the city in a rush, without the usual careful cut-outs.”

“And?”

“There’s an island,” Dorgan said. “All those materials you had me tracking that passed through the city before mysteriously vanishing? That’s where they’ve been going.”

“You have a location?”

Dorgan handed Rufus an envelope.

“Everything I have is in there.”

“Who knows about this?”

“I’ve been keeping the people I’m using apart from one another,” Dorgan said. “None of them know enough to put anything together and all of them know enough not to try and find out more. All they know is that I’ve been running this thing personally, which I never do. Even my daughter doesn’t know any more than I’m doing something for you.”

“What about the people keeping this meeting private?” Rufus asked.

“She made sure they can’t listen in, and they’re all people she brought into the Adventure Society herself. They’re loyal.”

Rufus looked at the envelope in his hands, nodding gravely.

“Thank you, Dorgan.”

“You aren’t the only one concerned about these people, you know,” Dorgan said. “You might look down on me but I’m part of this community. The people of Old City are my people.”

Rufus nodded, offering his hand for Dorgan to shake.

“I’ll remember that,” Rufus said. “Your daughter will have my support in her position, for what it’s worth.”

Dorgan accepted Rufus’ handshake.

“I thought you might hold a grudge,” Dorgan said. “I know you lost a friend on that expedition.”

“There’s plenty of blame to go around,” Rufus said. “I know who the enemy is.”

“Rufus isn’t here?” Valdis asked. “I was training with him just this morning.”

Jason was having a small gathering on his cloud houseboat, largely of adventurers who had been through the Reaper trials. A number of teams had stayed behind, deciding to use Greenstone’s lower-ranked monsters for some experience operating independently. This included Valdis’ team and Padma’s, both of whom were present at Jason’s party.

“Probably best not to talk about that,” Humphrey said quietly. “He took off out of the city with my parents and some other silver rankers late this morning.”

Rick Geller and his team were also present. Rick and his sister Phoebe had both reached bronze rank during the trials and would soon be returning to their home city. Going with them would be Dustin, Neil’s friend who had once suffered with him as Thadwick’s lackey.

Humphrey’s sister, Henrietta, was also in attendance. She had been bronze-rank for almost two years, now returned to Greenstone with their father in readiness for the

monster surge. They originally hadn't intended to, but with the increasing delay, they took the chance to visit home.

"Henri has agreed to help us train," Humphrey enthusiastically explained to his teammates. "She has the full set of familiars and summons, which is an area we really need to work on. We've really been underutilising the ones we have and now we have even more."

Jason looked at Henrietta, looking them over in turn. She was statuesque, like her brother, with strong, handsome features and hair cropped practical and short. Jason had now met Humphrey's father, seeing that the siblings both favoured the burly man in physique, compared to their slender mother.

Jason smiled to himself. It was plain that Henrietta was less interested in helping them train than in making sure the ragtag group Humphrey had assembled was good enough for her little brother.

"You find something funny?" she asked Jason.

"Invariably," Jason said with a laugh.

With so many new abilities, Jason and his team had immense amounts of work to do. Humphrey was as good as his promise at driving the team's training, from the basics on up. Physical training, movement training and meditation took up the mornings, then more individualised work to master their abilities in the afternoons.

Jason's training fell into two areas. Along with his new familiars, he started incorporating his new shadow arm power into his combat style. What at first seemed like a simple addition to his repertoire turned out to be a highly flexible power, both literally and figuratively. More than just being a much-welcomed source of necrotic afflictions, it offered incredible utility when incorporated into his parkour and martial arts.

It was while learning to use the shadow arm that he began to understand just how comprehensive the Way of the Reaper fighting style truly was. It had technique for incorporating various powers into movement and even martial technique. This included reach and teleport powers, such as Jason's, as well movement powers.

Sophie was undergoing a similar revelation, even more so with her larger number of new powers. They practiced the same style but her techniques didn't come from a skill book. This gave her a stronger foundation than Jason but meant she didn't already have the techniques she required and had to turn to the books they brought back from the Reaper trials to advance her knowledge.

Humphrey had gifted her his set of the Way of the Reaper books as he had his own fighting style and no intention to switch. Shade had once demonstrated the ability of the books to create a projection that offered guidance on the content of the books. Shade himself, however, was a far superior guide. Once the familiar to one of the old Order of the Reaper's leaders, Shade was well versed in their techniques. His active assistance was better than anything to be found in a book, even a skill book.

Each of Jason's three familiars brought something different to the table. Colin had proven his value time and again as an affliction bulk-delivery system that was incredibly hard to dislodge because of his swarm nature. The remaining two familiars, despite both being intangible cloak-shaped entities, were very different.

Shade offered little in the way of direct combat impact, only able to drain mana. His function was primarily one of utility. In addition to being an effective spy, Jason could teleport in and out of his shadowy figure. Placed judiciously around a battlefield, he made Jason all the more mobile. He could also be deposited in the shadow of enemies, almost impossible to detect, turning them into beacons from which Jason could discreetly spy while remaining hidden.

Gordon, by contrast, was the most directly combative aspect of Jason's arsenal, including Jason himself. The twin orbs floating around Gordon each blasted out sustained, destructive beams. One beam was orange, inflicting resonating-force that penetrated armour. The other was blue, delivering disruptive-force that was effective against magical protection and incorporeal enemies. The beams weren't wildly powerful, but they were too strong to ignore, tracked their targets and never relented.

Gordon was an incorporeal entity himself, barely affected by most forms of attack. Magic had a limited effect, but only disruptive-force attacks posed him a real threat. Part of the team's versatile nature was that many of them had such attacks, from Sophie's unarmed strikes to Clive's legendary weapons and Humphrey's new special attack, spirit reaper. During mock battles in the Geller mirage chamber, they would frequently go after Gordon to put a stop to his unrelenting attacks. He had the power to rapidly evade, however, transforming into a blue-orange cloud that could dash across the battlefield before he reformed to resume his attacks. The best deterrent turned out to be Belinda's lantern familiar, which had disruptive-force attacks of its own.

On top of their damage, Gordon's beam attacks doled out a stacking affliction that made enemies more susceptible to further afflictions by diminishing their resistances. It quickly became evident that the affliction or even the damage was not what made Gordon such an effective tool for Jason. It was the fact that Gordon's attacks, while not

overwhelming, were both powerful enough to require a response and completely unrelenting.

To a mindless monster, Gordon's continual attacks would be a constant source of threat, at least one of the beams effective against almost any kind of defence. To a more intelligent enemy they would recognise the threat Gordon would pose if left unchecked. Many healers and ranged magic users, like Clive and Neil, possessed magical shields that would protect them long enough for a guardian to intervene. A constant barrage of disruptive force would quickly penetrate that barrier and no team of essence users was stupid enough to leave the healer exposed.

Gordon's presence on the battlefield was not overpowering but it did require an answer, forcing the enemy out of their own pace and right into Jason's. A distracted enemy, reacting instead of acting was exactly the scenario in which his hit-and-run style thrived, the fires of chaos fed as he appeared and disappeared, loading up the enemy with afflictions.

Jason thought back to his fight against Rick's team. He no longer had the need to resort to extravagant theatrics to keep enemies off balance. With Gordon to force an enemy's hand and Shade for stealth and mobility, Jason wouldn't have to work so hard to crack a team's formation. Even in an open environment he could jump from one of Shade's duplicates to another, swift and elusive as the enemy still had Gordon to deal with. While his opponents scrambled to pin him down, he would be baiting them into the perfect place to unleash Colin, showering them in apocalypse beast.

All of that was when he was operating alone. Working with the team, there were several strategies open to him. For extremely tough opponents he would be the main damage dealer. He could be to his team what Gordon was to him; a distraction the enemy couldn't ignore lest it ruin them all. They could also flip that role, with the team engaging the enemy as Jason went around afflicting them all.

They devised a wide array of strategies for all manner of situations, varied enough to apply broadly and flexible enough to adapt to specifics. As they developed and refined their strategies, it became evident that rather than any individual strength, the team's greatest asset was flexibility. The versatility of their potential strategies made their defining trait the power to dictate the pacing of a battle.

Their efforts were excessive for fighting iron-rank monsters but they had their sights set higher. Monsters would become more intelligent at higher ranks, their powers more exotic. In the short term, there was no telling when they might find themselves in battle

with Builder cultists. They worked up specific strategies for what they knew about the cult and their tactics, Jason focusing on the controllers as the team contained the constructs.

Each evening, the team would wind-down after their training on the deck of the houseboat, frequently joined by another team. Some, like Beth's team, were mirroring Jason's in pouring themselves into training. Foreign teams like Valdis' and Padma's were enjoying the freedom of undertaking contracts without supervision. Padma's team mostly stayed around for Rufus who, along with Gary, had claimed the two empty bedrooms on the houseboat while the cloud palace was still off at the lake.

Beth put the idea of some more contests in the mirage arena to Humphrey. Humphrey begged off each time, seeing only how far the team had to go. Finally, Jason weighed in on the other side.

"It's time we had some pressure on us," Jason told him. "We have to put the team in the fire to see if we cook."

Chapter 189

Eclipse

The strike force had been small, to restrict information. Three gold-rankers, six silver-rankers and a dozen bronze-rankers. Rufus' parents, Gabriel and Arabelle, along with their teammate, Callum, were the golds. The silvers were Danielle Geller, Thalia Mercer, Elspeth Arella, Emir's chief of staff, Constance, and two more silver-rankers under Emir's employ. The bronze were Rufus, Gary and ten more of Emir's people, under Constance's command.

They arrived on the island in the dead of night. To avoid sharp senses they used no abilities, magical items or even magically-propelled vessels, instead sailing on ordinary ships and rowing ashore in dinghies. Only once they had eyes on the island's inhabitants were they sure that the enemy had not been forewarned. As expected, the cultists outnumbered them, even discounting the small army of construct creatures standing idle in rows.

To their good fortune, the island the cultists were occupying was not inhabited for a reason. The terrain was harsh, with the few flat, usable areas isolated from one another by ridges and gorges. There was very little plant life, mostly barren rocks, but the wild landscape of cliffs and rises gave them plenty of places to hide away.

The harsh topography forced the cultists to segment themselves into a series of camps and outposts, scattered around the island. Some were clearly well-established, with buildings of hewn brick or stone warped through essence abilities. For most, however, they were stuck with tents pitched onto rock or, for the lucky ones, hard-packed earth.

The best scout they had was Callum, the gold-ranked assassination specialist. He set out to reconnoitre while the others waited, quiet and hidden, for his return.

Gabriel looked at his son, whose schooled expression couldn't quite hide the rage behind his eyes. Rufus' mind seared with the memory of Farrah's death. With the panicked, unexpected battle and every mistake he made along the way. If he'd fought the way he should, the way he'd been taught, then maybe he could have bought those fleeting few seconds he hadn't known he needed before Danielle's intervention.

He reflected again on his lack of experience. His whole life he had been told of the amazing adventurer he was going to be, all the while shielding him from ever truly being responsible for himself. He had become sloppy and complacent, which quickly became evident once he arrived in Greenstone and fell into the hands of the blood cultists.

It became clear to him that for all his superbly trained, bronze-ranked might, the reality was that he was wildly inexperienced. The value of the Geller family's approach of raising their members with the most potential in a place where they could be responsible for themselves proved more and more true. He didn't realise just how great a deficit he faced until he was standing over Farrah's fallen body.

Since Farrah's death, Rufus' mind had been consumed with the next fight. He put aside luxuries and rest, spending every moment he could spare preparing for the next time he would face the cultists. If his father didn't have time to train with him then Emir, his mother, Danielle, or anyone stronger than him would do. If he couldn't find someone stronger then he trained others. Growing up in an academy he knew that teaching others could be a learning experience for yourself. Only when his parents, Gary or Jason forced him to take a break would he stop to rest or engage in some social activity. Even then, the fight to come was a fire in his mind.

Rufus had always been hailed as a prodigy, even amongst his family who trained the best adventurers in the world. Since coming to Greenstone he had failed to live up to that, time and again. No more. He was going to bring every bit of training, every bit of experience to the fight. They would suffer for every lesson he had learned, from every mistake he had made.

"Son," Gabriel said.

"I know," Rufus said. "Put the rage in a box and only take it out when I need it."

"Easier said than done," his mother, Arabelle, told him.

"The anger doesn't help me," Rufus said, his voice cold. "Last time I didn't fight the way I know I can. I was on the back foot, letting myself be caught up instead of making the battle my own. My eyes are clear."

Gabriel and Arabelle shared a look but didn't say any more. Shortly after, Callum returned.

"We have confirmation," he told them. "Priests of Purity are here. In full colours, no less. They're clearly confident we don't know about this place."

"Did you get a recording for proof?" Arella asked.

Callum shook his head. "There's a gold-rank priest down there. Too much chance he would have sensed it."

"We'll use recording crystals when we attack," Danielle said. "Just the one gold ranker?"

Callum nodded.

"What kind of numbers are we looking at, Cal?" Gabriel asked.

Callum started taking them through the numbers and dispositions of the priests and cultists on the island. There were more than a dozen different camps. They strategised a plan of attack, the low numbers that had given them this chance now their biggest weakness.

“We aren’t going to get them all, whichever way we go,” Callum said. “The portal devices set up at various points around the camp will probably serve as escape points once they realise things are going wrong. They may even run straight for them. Destroy them if you can but don’t take any undue risks. We have trouble enough with the numbers.”

“If they have as many portal devices as you described,” Danielle said, “then they really do have better astral magic than we do.”

“How do you get that from just a lot of portals?” Gary asked.

“The cost,” Danielle said. “If they had the resources it would take to make that many portal devices with our knowledge, they could have mounted a very different operation.”

Ultimately, they decided to break into task-focused teams, trying to sweep through the camps as quickly as possible. The key reason they could take on such a larger force was that the disparity in rank made up for the disparity in numbers. Three gold-rankers to one was more than enough to even the odds, so long as they could bring that power to bear effectively. They hadn’t been expecting even one gold-ranker, so they had to put him down fast.

That was the task of team one. Their objective was to eliminate the leadership, the gold-rank priest, his silver-rank followers and the silver-rankers from the cult. Team one was the smallest but most powerful, consisting of all the gold-rankers and most of the silver. The goal was to finish their task quickly and move to support the others. The enemy only had one gold-ranker to their three, and their three were all top-tier by any measure.

Elsbeth Arella would lead a second team to engage the construct monsters, wiping them out before they could be brought to bear elsewhere. The largest contingent of constructs were gathered in the largest camp, which was where they would strike first.

The third team, led by Constance, would seek to sweep the bulk of the cultist forces of bronze-rank and below. The leadership were gathered together in the least awful of the island’s outposts, while the remainder of their forces were scattered around the various camps.

The bulk of their own bronze-rankers would be split between teams two and three. They would both face superior numbers, but again, they were relying on quality over quantity.

“We don’t have a way of taking cultists prisoner without them killing themselves, so don’t even try,” Gabriel said as they prepared to move. “We’re outnumbered, so remember that you might be stronger than any of your enemies, but you aren’t stronger than all of them. Reserve your strength as best you can. Staying alive until team one comes in to mop up is your top priority. The entire point of splitting up is so that they can’t consolidate. Hitting multiple points will hopefully get them thinking our numbers are greater than they seem until our gold-rankers are brought fully to bear and it’s too late.”

“What about the priests?” Gary asked. “Do we take them prisoner?”

“We don’t have the numbers,” Gabriel said. “If they aren’t one of us, put them down. Any that live to be taken as prisoners at the end is a bonus.”

“Assuming we win,” Arabelle added. “You all know your withdrawal points; a fighting retreat early is better than a rout later. The withdrawal points are defensive enough to hold until we come for you.”

The three teams struck under cover of darkness. Team one came down like the hammer of god, three gold-rankers erupting like an explosion. Gabriel blasted out waves of fire and wind with sweeps of his sword, turning everything they passed through to tumbling cinders. He moved swiftly, every move devastating as he crashed through the battlefield like the embodiment of wrath, delivering annihilation left and right as he bore down on the gold-rank priest.

Arabelle moved through like a breeze, the enemies she touched with her hand collapsing to withered husks. With each one, an urn, glowing red with life force appeared around her, ready to fuel her other powers. As the priests and cultists started fighting back, she used that life force to fuel potent healing magic and devastating attacks. Trailing behind her husband, however, she went unnoticed by few beyond her victims.

Gabriele, Arabelle and Callum had been companions for decades, falling into one another’s rhythms like dancers. Gabriel enacted his attention grabbing onslaught with Arabelle to cover his flanks and heal his injuries. Callum used that opportunity to hone in on the true objective. As the gold-rank priest prepared for the oncoming threat of Gabriel, Callum appeared behind him to strike.

Callum was an expert assassin and his abilities landed strong and true on the priest, to devastating effect. No gold-ranker would die easily, however, and even Callum’s prowess was not enough to secure the kill immediately. The priest was already healing as he responded to Callum’s assault, even as Gabriel and Arabelle moved closer.

The Silver-rankers were not as overwhelming as they clashed with their cultist counterparts and the rapidly-awakening construct monsters. Nonetheless, they were still

more than holding their own. Every member of the small force they had brought along was a powerhouse for their rank.

Team two struck the largest collection of constructs first, rows on rows of them arrayed like soldiers on parade. Elspeth Arella had not been chosen to lead it at random, the reasons for which were obvious as she immediately made devastating headway. Her telekinetic powers were constrained against people, requiring that she first penetrate their auras. Since the constructs had little more aura than an inert rock, she could wield her powers against them to full and spectacular effect.

She raised her arms out in front of her and entire clusters of the constructs floated up into the air. Waving her arms like a conductor, she had them smash into each other again and again until all that remained was a floating cloud of debris. She then flung her arms back down, sending the debris cloud clashing into the panicking cultists trying to send more of the constructs to their defence.

As Arella started the whole process over, the rest of team two surged forward with Gary at the lead. In his hand was a hammer he had forged himself, specifically to fight such enemies. The heavy head came down on the first construct he could reach, shattering it like glass. The others surged around him, having been picked out as most effective against their artificial enemies.

Team three has the largest number of actual cultists to deal with and Constance didn't have the kind of powers Arella did to make such a potent opening salvo. Worse was an unpleasant surprise, hidden amongst the cultists: three silver rankers to their one. Callum had scouted out all the silver-rankers but apparently they had moved camps while the team was plotting their attack.

The initial assault went well, with most of the cultists asleep in their tents. The attackers still didn't know of the silver rank surprise waiting in store, the first signs being a defence that was organised much more quickly than anticipated. The cultists were forming squads and awakening constructs in a swift and organised manner under the tyrannical control of the silver-rankers.

The element of surprise was soon overwhelmed by the numerical superiority as the cultists organised a counter-attack. Constance moved to try and curb the troubling response, which was when the silver-rankers revealed themselves. All three launched themselves at Constance, although her habitual caution prevented her from suffering as she responded with a careful and defensive drawing back. The moment she sensed three silver-rank auras, she loudly called for all her people to retreat.

The call almost came too late, with team three scattered by the cultist counteroffensive. It was a near thing but the team was saved by a swift and destructive force passing through the enemy, leaving death in its wake. Golden light of the sun and silver light of the moon alternated bright flashes as Rufus moved through the cultist ranks, untouchable and unstoppable.

His movements were swift and smooth, except when he flickered with a flash of sun or moonlight, vanishing from one spot to appear in another, one of his two swords securing a kill. In one hand he held a searing, golden sword. It passed through cultist and construct alike, as if his enemies were a soft cheese platter. In his other hand was a silver sword, almost impossible to see in motion. Unable to read its trajectory, it found a critical joint or soft throat before the enemy realised they were dead.

Those few who managed to survive the kiss of Rufus' blades were left with malign reminders. Those injured by the golden sword had a small orb of fire, a miniature golden sun, float around them, scorching them with the heat it put out. Those touched by the silver sword had a tiny moon instead. It soaking up heat instead of delivering it, chilling to the bone and sapping strength.

Rufus' path of death was marked by beautiful light. The tiny suns and moons shone brightly in the night. His power to speed up so quickly the world seemed to freeze left a trail of light where he moved. Cut-apart constructs and severed chunks of armour glowed red-hot from where his golden sword passed through.

With Constance fending off the silver-rankers, it was Rufus and his whirlwind efforts that extracted the bulk of team three, reducing their losses from near-total to only a few. A trail of death was left in his wake. Frustration squirmed through his mind as what was meant to be a vindicating attack became another fighting retreat, just like the last time.

His people were getting away and it was time to withdraw but anger blazed through him as this battle and the last merged together in his mind. He saw Constance fighting back against the silver-rankers the way he, Gary and Farrah had fought back the cultists and their creations.

Looking at Constance's battle in glances as he continued to massacre his way through the lower-ranked enemy, he first thought his mind was projecting. Then he looked again and saw he was right. One of the trio Constance was barely holding off was the man who killed Farrah. The same macabre mixture of flesh and steel.

Their people were on the retreat and he had to leave, he knew that. The last time he had faced the monstrosity it had bested him in moments, he knew that. It was time for him to go back. He knew that.

He went forward.

In the midst of the chaos, the cultist, Timos, was hurrying in the direction of the closest portal device. There was yelling and screaming, constructs lumbering into motion and cultists running back and forth. He had no idea how anyone had found them; they had been so careful. He realised, logically, that the flaw in their veil of secrecy most likely came from their church of Purity allies. His instincts, however, wanted to blame the man at his side.

“What are we going to do?” Thadwick asked in a panicked half-squeal.

“Shut up,” Timos snarled.

Against Timos’ emphatic recommendation, his superiors had not only decided to keep Thadwick alive in case there was some use for him, but made Timos’ responsible for the idiot. While others around him were running, wild with panic, he made purposeful strides for the portal as his mind silently piled a litany of hatred on Thadwick.

Everything had started to go wrong the moment Thadwick joined them, like a curse somehow sent from their enemies. Timos knew Thadwick wasn’t truly the engineer of their troubles, yet couldn’t dislodge the idea from his mind.

He saw the portal flare to life up ahead, shining silver-blue in the darkness. He considered leaving Thadwick behind and claiming he was lost in the chaos. The consequences of disobedience if the lie was discovered, however, still outweighed his hatred for Thadwick. He grabbed the fool by the front of his shirt and yanked him in the direction of the portal.

There was a trap in Rufus’ powers that he had been warned time and again not to fall into. It was a trap that many essences users had. Synergistic powers were potent, but one could easily spend so much time setting up the perfect moment that they died for missing the good one.

Now, Rufus was diving into the trap he had been drilled for years to avoid. Willing Constance to hold out, he didn’t make directly for the place the silver-rankers were fighting. Instead, he continued moving through the crowd of enemies, disappearing from one spot and appearing in another, accompanied by flashes of light.

Unlike Jason, Rufus didn’t have a teleport power he could use over and over again. Instead, he had a slew of powers that blended movement, teleportation, illusionary after-images and attacks. It took skill and practice to chain them all together in a dynamic environment, which is exactly what Rufus did with absolute confidence. By the time he

worked though his powers they became available all over again as he became an unstoppable dervish of light.

Now, Rufus was no longer going for the kill. With grazing wounds and minor cuts, his twin blades left a swarm of tiny suns and miniature moons behind as his swords flashed with absolute precision. He kept moving, kept slicing, cutting and moving forward, desperately urging Constance to hold out. Every time he caught a glimpse of the silver-rank battle she was being pressed harder and harder.

Gradually, a sea of tiny suns and tiny moons orbited amongst the crowd of enemies, construct and cultist alike. The enemy milled, their earlier coordination turning to confusion. Their leadership was caught up battling Constance, too busy to give the earlier direction. The enemy had retreated, leaving only Constance and the elusive dervish of light moving through them like a poltergeist.

Constance's voice cried out in a scream as a powerful attack penetrated the magical bubble shielding her. It had been key to withstanding the barrage of attacks she was subjected to but it was close to collapsing entirely. Rufus knew the time had come to act, and in any case, he had pushed himself to near collapse. His body and mind ached with the depletion of his stamina and mana. Turning finally toward the silver-rank battle, he tossed away his conjured swords and threw back the strongest recovery potion he had. He felt the fresh infusion of mana and stamina flush through his body like dipping into cool water. He activated his speed ability one more time.

Time seemed to freeze around him. Ahead, the three silver-rank abominations and Constance motionless before him like the painting of a battle. He did not use his fleeting moment of acceleration to attack, needing it to stop and chant a spell without suffering an attack from the enemies surrounding him.

“Darkness and light, sun and moon; be mine to awaken and move at my command. Mine is the realm and mine is the power; bring forth the kingdom of eclipse.”

Rufus' speed power came to an end just as he completed his chant and darkness, like some great explosion, swept over the battlefield. The stars in the sky were gone, as were the twin moons that had lit up the battle. Every glow-stone embedded in a construct or floating around a cultist went dim, leaving only the tiny suns and moon to cast light. The crowd of cultists cried out in shock and even the silver-rankers were startled into giving pause. The halt in their attacks gave Constance a much-needed reprieve.

The suns and moons floated up, into the air. The people they left behind were suddenly drained of colour, leaving only dark silhouettes. Flames of silver and gold lit up, limning the dark silhouettes as they began to scream.

Above them, the suns and the moons started merging together, growing and melding as they formed an enormous orb of darkness, shrouded in light to form an eclipse, floating over their heads. It loomed over the battlefield, potent and domineering in the magical darkness that filled the air. The shrieking cries of those burning in fire of silver and gold below made a horrifying accompaniment to the ominous eclipse.

The silver rankers had strong magical senses and felt the connection between the darkness that had enveloped them, the orb floating above them and the person who had called it into being. They turned as one, their gazes falling on Rufus. He was finally standing still but the cultists around him were either burning with fire or wild with panic, too busy to recognise the enemy in their midst. A construct lunged at him but he raised a hand without even looking at it, a stream of sun fire launching out and melting the steel monstrosity on the spot.

One of the three silver-rankers sneered with recognition as he locked eyes with Rufus. Rufus' face was impassive as he rose an arm to point at him, the cultist who had taken Farrah's life. From the orb above, a terrifying beam blasted down at the abomination, a bright beam with a dark core, pouring transcendent damage into the cultist.

Rufus has never come anywhere close to building up so much power with which to use this attack before. Against anything short of silver rank would have been instantly annihilated and even most silver-rankers would have died in moments. The cultist upon whom Rufus poured all his rage and all his power was no ordinary silver-ranker, however. Standing at the peak of his rank, on the cusp of obtaining gold, and with the fullness of power bestowed by its otherworldly master, the cultist was still standing when the beam was spent, the power gathered in the eclipse exhausted. It vanished, the oppressive field of darkness vanishing with it.

Across the battlefield, dozens of cultists and constructs were dead, the fires having taken their toll. The enemy that had taken the brunt of that power still stood, although anyone looking at his state might assume he wished he hadn't. The cultist had conjured one steel wall after another to try and endure the transcendent blast but it stormed through them, one after another. The cultist suffered much the same treatment, the flesh and steel of his body fused together like a candle melted by sunlight through a window.

There was an odd stillness throughout the battlefield, all eyes on the ruined cultist. He moved, just a little, then a little more. He flexing his warped limbs and melted muscles roaring in wordless pain and rage.

Rufus was as spent as his power, everything he had and more burned through to set up and deliver one grand attack. The last thing he saw before passing out, surrounded by

enemies, was the hideously injured cultist, more an abomination than ever, moving in his direction.

Chapter 190

A Question You Don't Yet Know to Ask

Jason and Humphrey were the first to rise each morning, Jason making the team breakfast while Humphrey plotted out the day's training. One of the things Emir had warned Jason about was that the houseboat would require additional materials to perform various functions, be they universal or more specific to Jason individual needs.

Jason had been finding the cloud grill a delightful new culinary tool, for which the houseboat required the addition of fire quintessence gems. Fortunately they were only iron rank, and were relatively inexpensive to source in a desert region.

Jason and Humphrey were out on the deck, Jason working hot cakes on the grill as Humphrey sat at a table, looking over the meticulous notes he was taking on the teams training. Winter was pleasant in Greenstone, with mild temperatures and less of the mugginess pressing in from the delta. The sky was a gorgeous, cloudless blue, with a crystal clarity to the air even the brightest summer day couldn't match.

"I think we'll have a nice one, today," Jason said.

"You're right," Humphrey said. "How about we do some outside training? Maybe focus on mobility training."

"Works for me," Jason said. "Did you schedule that match-up with Beth's team?"

"It won't be for a few days," Humphrey said. "We aren't the only ones in a training frenzy after the Reaper trials and the mirage chamber is heavily booked."

Like everyone who safely returned from the Reaper trials, the various Geller family teams had brought back a treasure-trove of awakening stones to complete their power sets. Danielle Geller had received the same forewarning as Jason about the chance for unusual awakening stones, thus most now had a Reaper ability in their repertoire. Many had started actively dodging Clive and his enthusiastic questions about their new powers. He had also urged Belinda to shape-shift into Jason, in an attempt to replicate his interface power, but she always ended up with his astral affinity and map powers.

"The map is a great power," Jason had insisted as Clive complained.

"Not for administrative purposes," Clive had bemoaned.

"I think you and I look at the potential of magic powers in very different ways," Jason told him.

As Humphrey and Jason chatted while going about their morning tasks, Jason spotted a familiar, but unexpected figure walking along the marina pier.

"Humphrey," Jason said. "Your ex is coming by."

“My ex?” Humphrey asked, looking up and spotting Gabrielle as she approached the houseboat.

Jason and Gabrielle had soured on one another, not the first person whose strong religious views had placed them antagonistic to Jason. His only regret, though, was the part that played in ending Humphrey’s relationship. He respected Humphrey for having the strength to end things with someone who stood out even in a world full of people made beautiful by magic. Jason doubted he could have made as mature a choice at seventeen.

Jason invited Gabrielle aboard. The open deck areas of the houseboat didn’t require the boat to take an aura imprint before granting access.

“Gabrielle,” Humphrey greeted, a complicated expression on his face.

“Hello Humphrey,” she said. Dressed in a plain version of the robes of her church, she was clearly trying to be impassive but emotion clouded her face. Steeling herself, she turned to Jason.

“The goddess has a new gift for you,” she said. “I’m here to deliver it.”

“Is it strippers?” Jason asked. “Not you; you’re too young. Other strippers, but roughly the same level of hotness.”

Humphrey and Gabrielle both gave him horrified looks.

“What?” he asked innocently.

“Ignore him,” Humphrey said.

“My lady wants me to tell you that objectification jokes are beneath you,” Gabrielle said to Jason.

“Yeah,” Jason said with a chuckle, “but you shouldn’t trust someone who doesn’t spend at least a little time in the gutter.”

“I very much disagree,” Gabrielle said.

“Colour me surprised. So what does your boss have for me? I’ll admit I’m a little trepidatious, after the last time.”

“She recognised your concerns and has prepared a new gift you should find more palatable,” Gabrielle said, clearly unhappy. “You should know that this gift edges against the boundaries of her own rules. Consideration that you clearly don’t deserve.”

“What do you mean?”

Gabrielle open the dimensional satchel and started pulling out books, one after another, piling them on the table

Next to Humphrey’s notes.

“This knowledge is the answer to a question you don’t yet know to ask,” Gabrielle said as she continued taking out books. “This pushes the limits of what she is willing to do.

Further, this knowledge is not of this world. She was reticent to give it to anyone, but you are not of this world either.”

“Not of this world?” Humphrey asked.

“The builder cultists have been bestowed knowledge from beyond this world,” Gabrielle said.

“Ah,” Jason said. “I know she likes this world to develop knowledge for itself, which is why she offered to bribe me in the first place. The Builder cult doesn’t care about that, though, and now the genie’s out of the bottle.”

“What would a genie be doing in a bottle?” Humphrey asked.

“Wait, genies are a thing?” Jason asked. “Do they grant wishes?”

“No, that would be outrageous. Do they grant wishes where you come from?”

“Just in stories,” Jason said, then turned back to Gabrielle. “So this knowledge is something that comes from the Builder?”

“Yes. Once the knowledge was known by someone in this world, it became part of the goddess. She personally transcribed these tomes for delivery to you.”

Humphrey’s eyes went wide.

“The goddess made these personally?”

“Yes,” Gabrielle confirmed as she took out a small wooden case. She opened it to reveal neat rows of recording crystals. “She also created these and the information contained within. She would have produced all these as skill books that you could absorb more quickly but knew you would reject them.”

“I would,” Jason said. “I won’t imprinting things directly into my mind that came from sources I don’t entirely trust. So, what is all this knowledge?”

“The goddess recommends you turn to your friend Clive for assistance. She anticipates he will be quite enthusiastic.”

Jason picked up a random book and opened it up. It looked to be some kind of magical theory, at a level well above what he could parse at a glance. He closed the book and sat it back down.

“Thank you,” he said. “I’m not really sure of the ramifications of this gift, but given the source, I expect it to be quite specifically useful.”

Gabrielle shook her head. “I am constantly at a loss as to why the goddess feels you warrant such consideration.”

“You and me both, sister. You want to stick around for pancakes?”

Gabrielle gave Humphrey an uncertain glance, then shook her head.

“I have further duties to attend to. I shall take my leave here.”

Rufus was stirred back to consciousness under the effect of his mother's potent healing magic. He was laying on the sandy shore of the island.

"We won, then?" he groaned.

"We were already on the way when we saw your field of darkness go up, and then that huge beam," his father said. "We finished off that silver-ranker but he was close to done when we found him."

Gabriel gave him a proud smile, placing a warm hand on Rufus' shoulder. "Fantastic job, son."

"What your father means," Arabelle said with a pointed look at Gabriel, "is that you should never have confronted an enemy like that."

"Exactly," Gabriel said. "Terrible job, son. Don't do it again."

Arabelle shook her head at her menfolk. "I think its time for another child," she said. "A daughter, this time."

"I'd love a little girl," Gabriel said. "What essence should we give her? How about a whip essence? I saw a student at the academy doing some very interesting things with one just recently."

"I think you're skipping a little far ahead, dear."

"What about the cultists?" Rufus asked.

"A lot of them made it through the portals," Callum said. Rufus hadn't even realised he was there, which was normal for Callum.

"We got most of the leadership," Callum continued. "The count came up with one silver-ranker less than my initial count, so they likely escaped."

"Prisoners?" Rufus asked.

"None," Gabriel said. "The cultists did the usual self-detonating crystal star thing. Before they did that, though, they killed off the priests amongst them."

"Killing their own allies," Arabelle said, shaking her head. "I hate fighting zealots."

"We have plenty of recordings of Purity's clergy consorting with the cultists, though," Callum said. "More than enough for the other churches to form an ecumenical council and forcibly investigate."

Rufus pushed himself to his feet.

"So, what now?" he asked.

"Now we bring in everyone else. We need to identify the dead, see if it leads us to more cultists. Give the Magic Society a chance to figure out where these portals go. As for us, we can head back to the city."

For Jason and his team, days of unrelenting training turned into weeks as potential slowly transmuted into capability. This included regular practise against other teams in the mirage chamber. Beth's team was likewise improving rapidly, beating them less than half the time but with only five members to the six on Jason's team. Padma's team was made up of Rufus' juniors from the Remore Academy and interested in testing themselves against the person Rufus had trained personally. At first, their conflicts were one sided but Jason's team advanced in leaps and bounds until they started winning as much as they lost.

Padma's team was standoffish at first, all the more when they rolled over Jason's team in their early encounters. They opened up as Jason and his team solidly proved their worth, although their draconian member remained stolid in his disdain for Humphrey and his dragon essence. Their shapeshifter, Natalie, struck up a friendship with Belinda. She was a valuable voice of experience in the specialised area of changing forms.

Padma's team leader, in the mean time, built up a rivalry with Valdis. Both were sword specialists with almost identical essence combinations, but were very different swordsmen. Valdis had the classic combination of sword, swift and adept, which produced the master confluence. Each essence was common, but with legends like Rufus' grandfather, no one would look down on it. Valdis was very much a swordsman of that tradition, with an array of special attacks that, at a glance seemed very similar. Every aspect of his combat built from and led to his mastery of the sword.

Lance, Padma's team leader, was an elf. As such, his aptitude was on spells, rather than the special attacks of a human. His essences, sword, myriad and adept, also produced the master confluence, yet produced a wholly different combat style. He could not match Valdis toe-to-toe, but he had no need to. He was far from weak in hand-to-hand but his powers gave him the freedom to fight at any range. Mixing spells into his swordsmanship, he could duplicate himself and conjure dancing blades to fight for him, firing waves of razor sharp force from a distance.

Of the two swordsmen, the more experienced Valdis edged out his opponent more often than not, although Lance would score his own points as well.

Valdis and his team maintained a perfect record against Jason's in the mirage arena, although what began as a series of thrashings slowly became actual battles. To hear Valdis talk, however, enjoying post-fight drinks on the houseboat, anyone would think he was the one losing.

“Your team is terrible to fight against,” he said to Jason. “You’re running around like an invisible, teleporting plague while your familiar is trying to burn down our healer. Normally my job is to put down problems like that, but that damn woman is made of the wind. How does an immovable object move that quickly? That’s not how immovable objects work.”

“You do realise you won, right?” Jason asked him.

“She head-butted my sword! That shouldn’t work. And what’s with that woman who’s everything? She had a wand in one hand and a shield in the other, which doesn’t seem like something people should be allowed to do.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not a rule.”

“Once she hit me with my own power. My own power! Being able to take on different roles is one thing, but none of those roles should be me!”

“Calm down,” Sigrid told him. “You’re spilling your drink.”

In the wake of reaper trials, the city had a relative flood of essences and awakening stones. The foreign adventurers largely took their gains and left but many locals had also participated. Most had never intended to vie for the ultimate prize, instead plundering the astral space for as much treasure as they could carry away and survive. As a result, the market price of essences and stones reached an all-time low.

With so many essences and awakening stones entering the market, Greenstone’s adventurer population was undergoing a surge. It made for a strong first step in replenishing the numbers diminished by the losses of the disastrous expedition.

The ramifications of the expedition were also still being felt in the ongoing presence of the Adventure Society inquiry. After beginning with sweeping demotions, they had put the branch records through a sieve in the time so many adventurers were away at the Reaper trials. Once they returned, the inquiry commenced interviews, sometime with individuals, other time with groups. Gossip buzzed as the interviews went on, discussing the questions being asked. They ranged from the individual and specific to broad ideas about the adventuring culture of the city.

Finally they had started going through reassessments, assessing which adventurers deserved rank reinstatement one by one. This brought with it a sense of hopefulness, but for most their demotions were confirmed. Those who had their membership revoked entirely did not have those decisions revisited. The lobbying to do so from certain sectors was swiftly and emphatically refused.

Other concerns were of an import that iron-rankers like Jason and his team were uninvolved, although connections kept them abreast of goings on. The Builder cult was on the back foot, at least locally. The cult had been purged from the city and, after several costly ambushes, halted their supply raids in the delta. The escapees from the island raid were still at large, however, and as stories rolled in of the cult's activities around the world, tension built as the city awaited the revelation of their next plot.

The church of Purity was under more scrutiny than any church would ordinarily have to tolerate as an ecumenical council of the other churches sanctioned them, launching a sweeping inquiry. Their temple was searched and all manner of materials seized. The church officially maintained that their members present at the island raid were a schism faction denounced by their god. Claims of a few isolated, bad apples rang hollow, however, as similar revelations were made about the church of Purity around the world.

Certain individuals stood out, either by their absence or the issues in which current events embroiled them. A number of key members of the church of Purity seemed to have vanished on 'previously-scheduled sabbaticals,' No one knew where they had gone on their 'spiritual wanderings of the soul.' This included the church of Purity's Archbishop, Nicolas Hedron, Anisa Lasalle and almost the entire Lasalle family, long deeply involved in affairs of the church. Those that remained claimed no knowledge of where their spiritual journeys had taken them.

Jason was especially delighted to hear about Lucian Lamprey scrambling to absolve himself. Lamprey's personal intervention in handing the star seed over to the church of Purity was suddenly the object of significant scrutiny.

The time-displaced priests Jason had released from the astral space were an unusual new presence in the city. Most were absorbed into their various churches, but the former members of the church of Purity were another matter. As Jason predicted, the Adventure Society had taken their disposition in hand. Given the troubles being faced by their former church, they were a rather awkward presence within the city.

While their essences were taken from them, the damage was limited while they were still iron-rank. They could never reclaim the confluence essence they gave up in favour of a divine essence, but the absence could be replaced, either by another divine essence or a regular one.

One group of the former purists dedicated themselves to regaining entry to the church of Purity. They were undaunted by the new revelations about their church, but their dedication was flatly rebuffed. A small number even turned to suicide in their despair.

Others sought positions in other churches, many finding success. The rest came to accept the need to start over and accepted new ordinary essences. With the market at record lows, the Adventure Society provided them as an act of mercy.

Whatever their situation, every member of the various faiths now escaped from the astral space had to decide on their future. They were all born before Greenstone was founded, knowing that aside from any who managed to reach gold rank, everyone they knew and loved was long gone. Many found passage to their homelands regardless, knowing that there was likely no one waiting for them or even anything they even recognised.

For those whose gods had welcomed them back, at least they had a path. Their churches situated them locally or sent them off in the direction of distant branches of their faith. Others, mostly former purists who came to accept their abandonment, decided to start over in Greenstone. They took the essences they were offered, even if they were cheap and less than ideal. For many, purist and otherwise, they rejected their former faith with ferocity. Filled with resentment at the gods who had sent them into that place, costing them everything and everyone they had known, they had a new attitude towards the gods that made Jason seem pious by comparison.

All the recovered clergy, excommunicated or not, had a variety of attitudes toward Jason. As the agent of their liberation they were largely grateful, although to wildly varying degrees. Some felt that he only released them as an afterthought or even resented him for their current situation. Many of the former purists fell into that camp. Most were more gracious, however, often appearing to thank him in person as he wandered about the Adventure Society campus.

There was even a small contingent who viewed him as their saviour, especially in the wake of the gods appearing to thank him in person. They went so far as to offer themselves into his service, which he repeatedly refused.

One day, Jason and his team returned from their training to Rufus drinking out on the deck of the houseboat with Vincent, the Adventure Society official with the outrageous moustache. The pair had previously maintained a casual relationship, although not since Farrah's death. Vincent's busy schedule and Rufus' driving obsession had left them seeing little of one another. After confronting Farrah's killer and being largely responsible for his death, Rufus was finally starting to move forward.

They were not alone, being joined by Gary and his friend Russel, an artificer from the Magic Society.

“Jason,” Vincent greeted. “Your reassessment interview with the Adventure Society has been scheduled. I thought I’d come and tell you in person.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “Any idea if I’ll be getting my old rank back?”

“The issue is that you’re very... loud for an iron-ranker,” Vincent said. “They’re going to want a display of humility.”

“No worries,” Jason. “No one’s as good at being humble as me.”

Chapter 191

Looking Forward

In the waiting room of Jory's clinic, Jason chatted with Jory's assistant, Janice, until Jory emerged from the treatment rooms in the back with a patient.

"Jason," Jory cheerfully greeted, after sending the patient on her way. "It's good to see you in person instead of just hearing you through your voice chat power. You know that weird message popping up to say you want to contact me can be disturbing, right?"

"Disturbing?"

"Remember the other day, you tried to contact me and I refused?"

"I figured you were busy with a patient."

"I was in the bath! It felt like you were watching me. It was creepy."

"Sometimes I just don't have time for a personal visit. The team's been busy with training."

"That much I know. I've barely seen Belinda, lately."

"Can you spare me a few minutes now?" Jason asked.

Jory glanced around the waiting room, which was around half full, then gave Janice a questioning glance.

"A few minutes shouldn't throw things too badly off," she said. "A *few* minutes."

"Come on," Jory said. "I'll make us some tea. Would you like one, Janice?"

"That would be lovely," she said with a sweet smile.

Jory led Jason back into the room he and whatever healer priest was on duty used to relax if things got too tense. It had a large cooler box and cupboards full of snacks and beverages. A large window looked out onto the courtyard where Jason, Rufus, Gary and Farrah used to train. Far from the dirt yard it was back then, it was nicely tiled, with standing and wall planters adding pleasant greenery.

"We've come a long way," Jory said, following Jason's gaze. "It was only in the summer that you were hopelessly lost, madly training in a dirty back lot. Now this place is a thriving medical centre and you're a big-time adventurer."

"This is only the beginning," Jason said. "Now I'm looking toward bronze rank. I think I can get there before I've been here a year. For sure, if the monster surge comes. All those monsters in that astral space sent my abilities shooting up. Same for everyone who doesn't use monster cores."

“I know,” Jory said. His voice was a complaint to Jason’s enthusiasm, despite talking about the same thing. “Mine did the same. I’ve never had the money to go spending on monster cores and I’m definitely not interested in hunting for them.”

“You’ve got the skills,” Jason said, “but I think you’re in the right place. There’s plenty of us out there killing monsters. We need more people helping those who need it the most. I really admire you for that.”

“Thank you, Jason. That means a lot.”

“Also, I need forty gallons of crystal wash.”

“Wait, what? Forty gallons?”

“If I could get in it a barrel that would be good. Maybe one of those big kegs that Norwich uses, with the little tap. That would be convenient.”

“What? Are you insane? Are you trying to soak your whole houseboat in the stuff?”

“Actually, kind of yes,” Jason said. “Emir warned me that it would require certain additional materials, especially early on, to fuel the various amenities. The cloud-stuff automatically cleans itself and anything in it. Have you ever noticed how you get out of the cloud bed feeling like you’ve just had a refreshing shower?”

“You know I’ve been...”

“Jory, we all know about you and Belinda.”

“You do?”

“Jory, I’m connected to the houseboat. I know anyone who comes aboard and where they are at all times. Even if I didn’t, Humphrey and I have been watching you sneak off in a dishevelled state every morning. I don’t even know why you’re hiding it. There’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I wouldn’t want to impinge on her reputation.”

“Jory, she’s a convicted criminal.”

“I was raised a certain way,” Jory said defensively. “I was taught that there’s a proper process to courting a lady.”

“Why didn’t you do that, then?”

“I was working up to it. Then she kind of grabbed me and dragged me off to her room.”

“At least she’s sensible,” Jason said. “Anyway, the cloud beds. Like everything else on the houseboat, the cloud-stuff cleans whatever’s in it. Unfortunately, the houseboat has used up whatever resources it started with for cleaning. Emir warned me that a lot of resources would need topping off early and now I need a bunch of pure quintessence and a full barrel of crystal wash. Luckily, most the Purity temple’s assets were seized and Clive

reckons he can get his hands on the quintessence I need. That just leaves the crystal wash.”

“Jason, that amount is crazy. A whole barrel?”

“Now, come on, Jory. I know for a fact that you massively increased the production with all those fancy foreign nobles in town. I’m willing to bet you have a decent amount stockpiled away.”

“I sold most of it,” Jory said. “The visiting adventurers are all gone now. Except Prince Valdis, who buys almost as much of the stuff as you.”

Jory looked down, scratching the back of his head absently as he let out a sigh.

“I can probably make that work,” he conceded. “I’m going to use that production space currently on crystal wash for the lesser miracle potion, but I’m still sourcing the materials I need. “That will be the engine to fund the clinic going forward. I suppose I could keep production up until then. I could have that much crystal wash by the end of the month.”

“Thanks,” Jason said gratefully. “I’ll pay full price, instead of the usual mate’s rates. I’ll be taking up a good chunk of your production, after all.”

“That’s appreciated,” Jory said. “Getting the church of the Healer’s assistance has been great but we still run some tight margins. That miracle potion money will be coming in eventually, but I used the last of the leftover money from the renovations on importing the materials.”

“Seems like the more money we make, the more we need, right?”

“No kidding,” Jory said. “Where are your costs coming in?”

“Preparing for bronze rank,” Jason said. “I don’t know when I’ll be able to get back to a big city, so I picked up the materials to resummon my familiars at bronze. I thought I’d be flush with coin after auctioning off those essences but I’ve pretty much got it all earmarked for preparing new equipment, materials for the house boat, summoning rituals, it just goes on and on.”

Jason let out a weary sigh. “I should let you get back to it then,” Jason said. “I need to go spend some more money.”

“You aren’t training today?” Jory asked.

“Humphrey and I are both having our rank reassessments at the Adventure Society this afternoon,” Jason said. “We decided to give the others a rest day. You should knock off early, go see Belinda. In fact, the symphony is playing tonight. Take her and use my private viewing booth.”

“You have a private booth?”

“I go whenever I get the chance,” Jason said. “That hasn’t been as much as I’d like, lately. I’ll swing by and make sure they know to let you use it. You have a good suit, right Jory?”

“Uh...”

“Oh, dear,” Jason said, shaking his head. He took a carousel of recording crystals from his inventory, looking through them until he picked one out and told Jory to stand still.

“What are you doing?” Jory asked as Jason moved slowly around him, waving the crystal up and down his body.

“This is a specialised recording crystal to take clothing measurements,” Jason told him. “I know a guy who’ll do a rush job for me without compromising quality. You’re lucky he’s actually my next stop.”

“You carry around a crystal specifically for clothing measurements?”

“A good adventurer is always prepared.”

“Mr Asano,” Gilbert greeted as Jason entered Gilbert’s Resilient Attire For the Discerning Gentleman. “Excellent timing. I was just having Emil take everything to the fitting room.”

“You’ve reached iron rank,” Jason said, shaking Gilbert’s hand. “Finally picked up that last essence.”

“Yes, I finally went and did it,” Gilbert said. “All my cloth essence abilities hit bronze years ago but I was resistant to more essences for a long time. Never seemed quite right to take essences that others could make use of to help people. Age and health are humbling, however. With the market the way it is, right now, I was running out of reasons not to get the others. I’ve been absorbing monster cores but I’m still a long way from bronze and the extra years it will buy me.”

Gilbert led Jason into the generous fitting room just as his assistant appeared, pushing a long rack of clothes from the back room on a wheeled trolley. As Emil departed to fetch the next one, Gilbert started showing Jason the outfits.

“Your winter wardrobe,” Gilbert declared. “As requested, this is largely in the Vitesse style, with the flourishes we discussed previously.”

Jason had long admired Emir’s dress sense, which he discovered was largely down to Constance. She had been kind enough to consult when Jason decided to buy his clothes for the cooler months. Between her advice and Gilbert’s expertise, Jason’s winter wardrobe was sleek, fitted and sharp. The colours were more earthy and sober than local Greenstone fashion, which favoured explosions of bright hues.

“It was engaging to work with something different to the local palate,” Gilbert said. “I am quite satisfied with the result.”

“So you should be,” Jason said with admiration. “You’ve outdone yourself, Bert.”

“Thank you, sir. With the mild winters, here, mid-weight fabrics are perfect. Included, of course, are some subtle enchantments to maintain the comfort level whether to day trends hot or cool. Off course, there is a selection of outfits that trend one way or the other. I have included an array of winter colours in the Vitesse fashion; dark greens and burgundies, the expected blacks, greys and blues. Some very nice browns; dark and rich as well as a deep caramel Miss Constance referred to as brandy. I’ve also included some lighter selections, of course, and the expected formal wear for various occasions.

Jason started putting the clothes away, opening the outfits tab of his inventory and placing each ensemble into its own set.

“Is there anything else I can do for you today?” Gilbert asked as Jason stowed one outfit after another.

“Actually yes,” Jason said. “A couple of things. One is rush job, just some basic formal wear for a friend that you can put on my tab.”

“You have his measurements?” Gilbert asked.

“Of course,” Jason said. “I picked up the crystal you suggested.”

“Very good.”

“The other job is non-urgent,” Jason said. “It’s time I started looking ahead and thinking about bronze rank. My combat robe is fantastic but I will need to upgrade.”

“Well-made adventuring garb is about matching material and craftsmanship to purpose,” Gilbert said. “You are wise to start thinking about it now, so we can put together exactly what you need.”

“Actually, there’s something I’ve been keeping up my sleeve for a long time on that front,” Jason said. He continued taking outfits off the racks and putting them away in his inventory as Emil hauled out more trolleys. Three were hanging racks while a fourth was a box trolley packed with underclothes and other sundry items.

“You got the love hearts on the boxer shorts just right,” Jason said as he rubbed the material between his fingers. “This texture is incredible. You were spot on to suggest the mist valley silk.”

“I import a large supply each year,” Gilbert said. “I’ve found it to be an exceptional choice for underclothes with our particular winter climate.”

Jason started looping ties around his neck, tying them before adding them to his outfits. He matched the knot to the outfit, whether a simple four in hand knot, a nice, clean

Pratt knot or a bold full Windsor. He even added a flamboyant trinity knot to a couple of the most outgoing outfits.

“I must confess, Mr Asano, I was uncertain about the noose but it does have a way of bringing an outfit together.”

“How many times, Bert? It’s a tie, not a noose.”

“I was concerned that your opponents might not see it that way should you find yourself in an unexpected engagement, Mr Asano. This shop provides *resilient* attire for the discerning gentleman, after all. I had an enchantment placed on the ties to prevent them from being used to choke you.”

“Very considerate, Bert.”

“Consideration is my watchword.”

“As it turns out, though, I don’t actually need to breathe.”

“Do you need to chant spells?” Gilbert asked.

“That’s a fair point,” Jason acknowledged.

He used the room’s full length mirror to adjust before putting everything away. then dark smoke manifested around him briefly, before vanishing to reveal Jason in one of his new outfits. He adjusted his tie slightly now it was incorporated into the ensemble.

“Well?” he asked.

“I may not be an impartial judge, Mr Asano, but I would say you look very dapper.”

To Jason’s eye it had more of a gothic flair, compared a suit from his old world. The patterned embroidery of the vest and the flourishes on the long jacket that swept in at the waist before reaching down to mid-thigh. He gave a little shuffle, finding his movement utterly unimpeded. The shoes looked stylish but felt like athletic footwear.

“Superlative, Bert. You’re a credit to your profession.”

“Thank you, Mr Asano.”

“I have meeting with the Adventure Society, so I think I’ll wear it out.”

“Of course. Before you go, Mr Asano, you mentioned having something up your sleeve?”

“Right, yes.” Jason said. He wandered over to a table at the side of the room and retrieved a large bolt of dark material from his inventory. “I’ve been holding onto this for a while. What do you make of it, Bert?”

Bert moved up next to Jason and ran his finger lightly over the material. It was dark, matte and cool to the touch.

“Snakeskin,” he said. “Umbral snake, probably the mountain variety. Strong affinities for darkness and poison. Bronze rank, and it’s infused with some kind of odd magic. It almost feels intrinsic, rather than externally imposed, but…”

Gilbert frowned. “Was this a familiar?”

“It was,” Jason said. “Is that a problem?”

“In terms of the value of the material, just the opposite,” Gilbert said. “My concerns are ethical. You don’t get familiars without essence users.”

“You’re aware of the people running around causing trouble in the astral spaces.”

“Cultists or something,” Gilbert’s assistant said from off to the side. “It’s almost all anyone wants to talk about, these days.”

“Yes,” Gilbert said, giving his assistant a nod. “The competition held by the gold-ranker distracted people for a while – congratulations again, by the way – but they’re back to all this unnerving talk. Strange forces from beyond reality and the madmen that worship them. It’s as unpleasantly disconcerting as it is monotonous. Fear isn’t a look that matches any outfit to be found in this store.”

“Fear is to be expected,” Jason said. “The threat is real and it falls to more powerful people than us to stop it. About half a year ago, however, I ran across one of those cultists and he tried to kill me. After he died, his familiar tried to kill me too.”

He patted the material.

“This is its skin.”

“Good riddance, then,” Gilbert said. “We should see if we can’t make something of it to help you deal with more of them.”

“If the familiar was bronze-rank,” Emil said, “then the cultist must have been, as well, right.”

“That’s right,” Jason said.

“You’re only iron-rank, though,” Emil said.

“Back then, I wasn’t even that. Didn’t even have my first essence.”

“Then how did you beat them?” Emil asked.

“I got lucky,” Jason said. “Things that attack me have this way of ending up dead.”

“Do go on, Emil,” Gilbert said, dismissing his assistant.

“Yes, boss. Uh, can I ask you something before I go, Mr Asano.”

“Emil,” Gilbert admonished.

“It’s fine,” Jason said. “Go ahead, Emil.”

“Did all those gods really appear to thank you in person?”

“Gods turning up is hardly a big deal,” Jason said. “Spend some time at the Divine Square; they pop up with fair regularity. And I’d hardly call it ‘all those gods’ when it was barely a half-dozen.”

“Out with you,” Gilbert said, shooing his assistant out of the fitting room.

“He’ll be telling that story all over, Mr Asano. You’ve built up quite the reputation with recent events. A local boy, beating out all those fancy foreign adventurers? Princes and princesses, no less.”

“I’m not exactly local,” Jason said. “In fact, I’m about as far from local as it comes.”

“You’re a local now,” Gilbert said with a laugh. “You’ve been co-opted. Nothing earns good will like success.”

“So, this material is something you can work with?”

“I certainly can. If you’re willing to leave it with me I can investigate the best options.”

“Good, because it was a pretty big snake,” Jason said, taking out a second bolt of the material.

“Oh, my,” Gilbert said. “There’s certainly enough for two sets of armour here, probably three. Possibly even four, depending on how we use it. Were you looking at spares, or do you want something for your agile lady friend as well? This material should be useful for something that would suit her.”

Sophie, like Jason, used highly flexible armour made from trap weaver leather. Gilbert only catered to the discerning gentleman, but had a lady friend of his own. On Gilbert’s recommendation they had taken the trap weaver leather to Brenda’s Massacre Emporium, elsewhere in the trade hall.

“Sophie might want something that better combines flexibility and defence,” Jason said. “Stealth and poison doesn’t fit her power set.”

“Then would you like me to take the liberty of keeping an eye out for appropriate materials? I can have Brenda do the same.”

“That would be great,” Jason said. “For the whole team, in fact. How about I have them come in for a chat so you know what to look for.”

“A prescient idea, Mr Asano.”

Chapter 192

Adventurers Are People Too

Jason rode the elevating platform up through the Adventure Society administration building, arriving on the fifth floor. There was a new reception desk, installed as part of the changed being implemented by the inquiry team. Behind the desk was a familiar face.

“Bert,” Jason greeted him. “They’ve moved you upstairs. Is it the new essences?”

“It is,” Albert said. “Getting the full set is the way off the bottom rung in the Adventure Society. Or anywhere else, for that matter. Seems the higher-ups liked that I didn’t let them take Miss Sophie away when she was locked up in the prison tower.”

“Miss Sophie and myself both appreciate it as well,” Jason said. “It’s nice to see integrity being rewarded.”

“Is that one of the suits Gilbert was making for you?” Albert asked.

“It certainly is,” Jason said.

“Well, if you don’t mind me saying, Mr Asano, you’re looking quite sharp.”

“Thank you,” Jason said. “We have a saying where I come from: the suit makes the man. In a characteristic display of Bertinelli family excellence, your brother has made quite the man of me.”

“Thank you for saying, Mr Asano. You can go ahead and wait in the conference room.”

“I know the way. Thanks Bert.”

Jason went through to the conference room and sat down to wait. In the meantime, he pulled out a hefty tome of magical theory, opening to where he had marked his place with a ribbon and started reading. It wasn’t one of the new books Gabrielle had handed over, as they were too advanced, but a more foundational text he inherited from Farrah.

The books Knowledge had delivered to him fell directly into Clive’s field of astral magic, all focused on one specific aspect: dimensional transgression. Portals, teleportation and even the basic theories of passing between worlds. Clive had almost exploded with surprise when he first perused the books to glean their purpose.

“I don’t know if this is enough to get you to your world or back,” Clive had excitedly told Jason, “but it gets us orders of magnitude closer.”

Clive had been spending every moment not spent training buried in the books. They turned out to build on work he found amongst Landemere Vane’s notes, seized back from the church of Purity.

Jason closed the book and put it away as the door opened to admit Elspeth Arella and Tabitha Gert, the stern-faced leader of the inquiry team. He stood up to greet them, Arella shaking her head seeing that Jason had been sitting at the head of the table.

“Arella,” he said with a nod. “Interim Director.”

“Actually,” Gert said, “Director Arella has resumed her full duties as the inquiry comes toward a close. You may address me by my regular rank of Inspector.”

“Very well, Inspector,” Jason said.

Jason took in Gert at a glance, from the tightly bound hair and prim, plain clothes to the way her cold eyes surveyed her surroundings and seemed to find them wanting. Her resting expression exuded disapproval, as if she had a general expectation that the world at large would fail to live up to her standards.

Given his style of interpersonal relations, Jason had learned to swiftly assess how certain people would respond to his particular brand of provocational insouciance. He recognised immediately that the inspector was the kind of person with zero tolerance for the informal affability that was his strong suit. With people like that he would either crank it right up or dial it right back. It was a matter of what he needed from the interaction and how much he felt they deserved a prod. From everything he had heard, Tabitha Gert was a rigid, but even-handed woman, carrying out her job with stark professionalism. As he felt that integrity was deserving of respect, he kept his normal inclinations subdued.

Gert waved Jason to one side of the table as she and Arella sat opposite.

“Mr Asano,” Gert began. “In the course of our inquiry in to the general culture of this Adventure Society branch, your name has been appearing significantly more often than is appropriate for an iron-ranker. Which is to say, at all. Garnering the attention of the influential and powerful too early in your career is an excellent way for that career to reach an early and ignominious end.”

“I agree,” Jason said. “All I can say in my defence is that I made what I felt to be the right choice at each stage. I recognise, of course, that such a course often leads to places I never intended or wanted to go. I’m told that is a common situation for outworlders to find themselves in.”

Gert nodded, although even that affirming action somehow came across as disapproving.

“Your rank was reduced as part of the initial sweep of demotions,” Gert said. “From our brief initial assessments, your promotions had a smell of politics to them. That they were part of some kind of game Arella was playing.”

Arella remained silent and impassive, not reacting to the mention of her name or the postulation on her motives.

“I have no doubt that was a factor,” Jason said. “I like to think that my capabilities made it an easy pill to swallow, but naturally that is not an impartial opinion.”

“Do you think you deserve three stars, Mr Asano?” Gert asked.

“From what I’ve seen of the demands on adventurers, yes. At least at iron rank.”

“I’m inclined to agree,” Gert said, surprising Jason. She seemed built for delivering news you didn’t want to hear.

“I read your report of the contract surrounding the land in the forestry district. It was thorough and well-recorded. I look very favourably on thorough reports. Delivering that report directly to the upper levels of the administration was also well-considered. Your handling of a politically delicate situation demonstrated sound judgement. You also took being excluded from a prestigious expedition with equanimity, putting your energy into completing contracts. At the iron-rank level, this is more than sufficient to warrant a three star promotion.”

“I don’t imagine things are quite that simple, though,” Jason said.

“Indeed. Frankly, you have demonstrated a capability above your rank. The problem is that in doing so, you’ve demonstrated that you consider your rank to be below you. I am aware that you surround yourself with bronze, silver and even gold rankers, but you are not one of them. I have no doubt that you will climb higher, but before restoring your promotion, I would like to see a demonstration that you understand that you are, for the moment, an iron-ranker.”

Jason nodded.

“I surmised that something like this would come up during the reassessment,” Jason said, “and I have given it some consideration. I think I have a proposal that will work for everyone involved.”

“And what is this proposal, Mr Asano?”

“A road contract,” he said.

“A punishment detail,” Gert mused. “Interesting.”

“My reputation is riding high, right now,” Jason said. “Ostensibly, I should be swimming in accolades. But if you assign me a punishment detail and I eat it without complaint, then it will be a public demonstration of my respect for the Adventure Society’s authority.”

“What’s in it for you?” Arella asked, speaking for the first time.

“My team has been undergoing an intensive training period. Going out and facing some real-world challenges is exactly what we need right now. In my world they call it a shakedown cruise. It will allow me to show some humility and help some people along the way, which is a win all around, by my count.”

“A well-considered idea,” Gert said. “I approve.”

“I’ll be choosing your scheduled route,” Arella said. “You can expect a lot more trudging through the desert than nice delta towns.”

“That’s fine. I would appreciate if it included North East Quarry Village Four, if that’s possible. I made some friends there a while ago and it would be nice to check in.”

Arella looked slightly peeved at Jason welcoming her condition.

“Are you sure you can get your team to eat being placed on punishment detail with you?” she asked.

“We’re already making plans,” Jason said. “If you don’t give us one, we’ll probably roam around clearing off adventure board notices anyway.”

“Very well,” Gert said. “You will be assigned a road contract. Contingent on it being carried out satisfactorily, your promotion will be reinstated on its completion.”

“Thank you, Inspector.”

“Thank me by doing your job and doing it well, Mr Asano. We are done, here.”

She stood up and departed without a further word. Arella followed, giving Jason a complicated and assessing look.

“I’ll have the details sent to you before the road contracts go out at the start of the month,” she told him and likewise left the room.

Jason made his own way out, returning to the reception desk.

“How did you find the head of the inquiry team?” Albert asked as he paused for a chat.

“Disconcertingly agreeable,” Jason said.

Albert raised an eyebrow.

“That’s the first time I’ve heard someone call her agreeable,” he said. “The Duke hates her more than he hates Arella.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yes. She’s completely rigid when it comes to Adventure Society rules and authority but has a complete disregard for anything else. Locals laws and authorities mean nothing to her. I’ve seen the Duke march in here more than once, only to leave more angry than he arrived every time.”

“Something worth knowing. Good looking out, Bert.”

Valdis informed Jason and his team that they would soon be returning to the Mirror Kingdom and they arranged one final match in the Geller family mirage chamber. Jason and Humphrey gathered the team on the houseboat to discuss strategy.

“I really want to win, just once,” Neil said. “Sending him off knowing that we can stand along side the best.”

“That’s easier to plan than execute,” Humphrey said. “They’re all close to bronze-rank, more experienced and have been working as a team for much longer. They’ve been able to take apart every strategy we’ve attempted by staying calm and responding with tactics that make efficient use of their superior power and practised teamwork.”

“Then we disturb their calm,” Neil said. “Hamper their efficiency, disrupt their team work. Surely you have something, Jason? Disturbing people’s calm is your life’s work.”

“Well, I was thinking about something,” Jason said.

“Oh?” Humphrey prompted.

“We’ve been thinking about Valdis’ team the wrong way,” Jason said. “We’ve been strategising as if they were collections of power and skill sets.”

“You don’t think we should strategise around their powers?”

“Of course, but we also need to look at them as people. Think about Valdis. We’ve been looking at him as a high-speed, high-impact melee attacker and using Sophie to contain him. Trying to take him out doesn’t make strategic sense because the effort to put him down would cost more than having him put down is worth, compared to Sophie bundling him up.”

“You think that’s wrong,” Sophie said.

“I do,” Jason said. “We haven’t been thinking about them as people. Valdis isn’t just a power set. He’s a prince of the Mirror Kingdom. The rest of his team were hand picked to stand alongside him.”

“Oh,” Humphrey said, eyes wide as revelation dawned. “I get it. Disturb their calm.”

“Would you mind filling in the rest of us?” Neil asked.

“Strategically,” Humphrey explained, “their team is built around their healer, Sigrid. She facilitates and directs strategy. We’ve tried pouring into her multiple times but they have tried and tested strategies to defend against exactly that.”

“This isn’t new information,” Belinda said.

“The strategic core of the team is Sigrid,” Jason said, picking his explanation back up. “The political core, however, is Valdis. Prince of the Mirror Kingdom. He’s the reason their team exists and I promise you that in their heads, the central figure of the team isn’t Sigrid,

but him. This is our last shot at beating them until we go to the Mirror Kingdom and kick the snot out of them on their home turf. I'm willing to bet it all on the bottom line of Valdis' team being that he has to survive, whatever the cost."

"But this is a mirage chamber fight," Clive said. "He will survive."

"Yes," Humphrey said, "but those instincts have been ingrained for years. I can tell you right now, they were being prepared for Valdis' team before they ever received an essence."

"Exactly," Jason said. "That disparity between the actual core of their team, Sigrid, and the core that's been drilled into them, Valdis, is the gap in their armour. If we go all-in on Valdis, right out of the gate, I bet they'll do the one thing we haven't been able to force out of them. They'll make a tactical mistake. Even if it's just a fleeting moment before their discipline kicks back in, it gives us a small but critical window."

"So we feint on Valdis but actually move on Sigrid," Sophie said.

"Exactly," Jason said.

"We're going to have to really sell the feint," Humphrey said.

"We can do that," Jason said. "The advantage we have on them is versatility. We can change things up faster than they can react. So long as we can get them to make that mistake, we can capitalise before they can cover for it."

"You think we'll win like this?" Sophie asked.

"From just this, no," Jason said. "There's a good chance they'll regroup and retake their formation, even in the face of everything we throw at them."

"Then we need to figure out how to stop that," Neil said.

"No," Jason said. "We try and stop them, because it would be suspicious if we didn't. We fight hard to keep them scattered, which will make them clump together all the more. If they're going to put so much effort into gathering up, it would be a waste not to use that against them. The advantage of never having our strategies work against them is that they haven't seen them through to completion. It's time we showed Valdis and his team some things they've never seen before."

Chapter 193

Valkyrie

Valdis wildly fended off Humphrey's attacks as behind him, Sigrid desperately healed their team members. Even using his smaller sword Humphrey couldn't match Valdis' speed but his strength was overwhelming. Valdis was more highly-mobile striker than defender and could not meet the barrage of special attacks leaving him to a slow retreat as Sigrid fell back behind him.

In their previous encounters, Valdis had always ended up fighting Sophie while Humphrey used his heavy sword style to pressure the heavy defender from Valdis' team. He had dismissed Humphrey's swordsmanship as all power, no finesse.

Now Humphrey used his smaller sword, stylised as an angelic wing. Despite the embellishments it was still a practical, single-edged sabre, flashing out with much more rapid attacks than Valdis had seen from Humphrey in the past. When he first moved to protect Sigrid, Valdis assumed his superior skills would compensate for being forced into holding his ground. Only now did he remember that Humphrey's mother was a famous swordswoman. Humphrey's swordsmanship was every bit as rigorously trained as his own.

If it were simply a duel, Valdis' mobility and experience at duels and lighter blades would have given him the edge. Forced to keep himself between Humphrey and Sigrid, the advantage fell to Humphrey, whose style was more suited to a standing clash. He pushed Valdis back step by step, with solid, unrelenting attacks.

While Valdis had the unquestionably stronger team, the one advantage Jason and his allies had was versatility. They had seen almost every trick Valdis and his highly efficient cohort had to offer, while they had more up their own sleeves. Their ability to surprise was what had forced Valdis into the position he was now in.

As the fight began, Sophie, who normally went after Valdis, had instead bolted away while the rest of her team had converged on him to sell the feint. Clive switch-teleporting her with the heavy defender guarding Sigrid was the signal to give up the feint and move on her instead.

The defender had not been worried. Displacing the defenders was a standard strategy he had faced before and his abilities included a rapid-movement power that allowed him to reposition as circumstances required. When he went to use it, however, he was yanked back like a chained-up dog trying to sprint and getting pulled up by the neck.

He turned to look at what had jerked him back. There was a crystal rod sticking out of the ground, with a force tether connecting it to him. He launched into a charging special attack, which bounced off a force field around the rod, although he felt the impact weaken the field. At first he failed to notice the sense that another of his abilities suddenly became unavailable, as if he had used it as well.

He was human and had no shortage of special attacks, so when he started unleashing them, the force field quickly starting to buckle. Only as the field neared collapse did he realise that for every power he used, another became unavailable. When the field finally gave out, the crystal rod exploded, blasting him backwards. He was far too tough for that much to stop him, although he certainly felt it. It was not his first experience with the armour-penetrating feel of resonating force damage.

He pushed himself swiftly to his feet, only then realising that for every attack he had used, another power had been expended, including his critical movement powers. He recalled it was the effect of a curse levied by the strange role-shifting woman on the enemy team. With a grimace, he started running back in the direction of the main battle, encumbered by his heavy armour.

Sigrid had suffered a near-fatal damage when Jason and his team had sprung their trap out of the feint against Valdis. As Jason predicted, her team had suffered a brief but critical moment of panic, leaving the most slender of windows in which Sigrid was exposed to attack. Their enemies were poised for that moment, Jason's team poised to switch gears while Valdis' team moved to protect him.

Sigrid had barely kept herself alive through the use of a potent self-heal that would not be available again for hours. Even then, she was left badly hurt and even suffering some afflictions. Humphrey's spirit reaper attack had pounded down her personal shield, giving Jason the chance to throw some quick spells her way before the shield snapped back up.

Both teams had six members although their make ups were very different. Compared to Jason's eclectic and versatile team, Valdis had a traditional healer and heavy defender. The rest of his team were mobile and attack-focused and they focused on swift blitz tactics. Along with Valdis himself was a spearwoman who specialised in potent, charging strikes. Their ranged attackers were an archer using a mid-range skirmish style and a spell caster with the wind and needle essences.

Those three attackers found themselves in a fast-moving dance with Jason and Sophie, startled to find the pair more than holding their own against superior odds. Sophie was even faster than they were and apparently impervious to harm. She deflected

projectiles with her bare hands, physical and magical alike. When they tried to catch her in area attacks, they hit empty air she had already vacated.

Like Valdis, the trio were startled by the skill of their enemy. While they were frustrated at the inability to inflict any real damage, they were relieved by her lack of powerful attacks. They turned their attention to Jason but found him just as much trouble. Their own shadows had come to life, draining their mana as Jason moved in and out of them at will. At any moment he could appear or disappear right next to them, slashing out with his black and red dagger or quickly chanting a spell on the move.

Although the reach of his dagger was short, Jason's deceptive style proved a tricky opponent. His cloak floated around him, shrouding his movements as a dark arm reached out, carrying his dagger past the reach of even the spearwoman's lengthy weapon, while being far more flexible. He wasn't landing critical hits but he didn't need to.

The fight drew out as Jason's powers filled his enemies with a growing sense of dread. His afflictions carried their horrifying work on their flesh, only Sigrid's stream of healing holding it back. Their own shadows seemed to have turned against them, an intimate and unnerving form of attack.

Between rapid-fire shadow jumps and raw speed, Jason and Sophie flickered around the trio of enemies like mating hummingbirds. Jason was more aggressive than his normal in and out style, his quick attacks left only superficial wounds but each one was a clock of doom counting down on his enemies. He even cast the odd spell in the direction of Valdis and the defender madly sprinting back toward the fight. It was only the efficient healing of Sigrid being spread around the battlefield that kept things under control, although she didn't have time to spare to cleanse the afflictions.

Jason's more aggressive approach left him more exposed but he trusted Sophie to cover him. Every time their enemies thought they pinned him down, suddenly Sophie was there. Most teams preferred a traditional, heavy defender but Sophie was demonstrating the true value of the mobile guardian archetype.

When all three of their enemies came too close together, Jason unleashed one of his trump cards in the form of leeches spraying from a cut he sliced on his hand. That could well have spelled the end of the fight if not for Sigrid. Using another of her long cooldown powers, every member of her team other than the distant defender gained a short-lived shield that exploded out from inside them, blasting away the leeches covering their bodies.

Many of the leeches were destroyed on the spot, others being scattered across the battlefield. Even the brief exposure left more afflictions behind but Jason was taken aback.

Once he actually caught enemies out, the deployment of Team Colin was normally the finisher. Never before had his familiar been so thoroughly and immediately countered.

With all their members caught up in fights, Valdis' team faced one more threat from where Clive, Belinda and Neil were gathered behind a protective wall of summons and familiars. The bunker strategy was one of many the team had developed, a place for Belinda and Clive to launch control and attack powers from safety. It also freed Neil up to throw out shields and healing without the pressure Sigrid was being subjected to.

Neil had frequently sought out Sigrid over the past weeks. Their ability sets were similar and her experience was far more extensive than his. He had confidence in her abilities, but could not help but admire the equanimity with which she directed her team, even as Humphrey pressed in on her.

Even as Sigrid's team was thrown into chaos, caught up and scattered, they were slowly moving to regroup. Their discipline and experience showed as they slowly returned to formation, even caught up in their individual fights. If not for the dangerous spells pouring out of Clive, they might have turned the fight already. The need to shield her team was a key reason Sigrid was too busy to cleanse Jason's afflictions.

The minion wall made going after Clive, Belinda and Neil an infeasible option for Valdis' team until they had regained a semblance of order. The only attackers they could spare were their own familiars and summons, which could do no more than initiate a distracting monster brawl.

On Jason's side was the ominous figure of Gordon, whose blue and orange beams poured relentlessly onto the enemy minions. Belinda, Clive and Humphrey's familiars were likewise present, along with Neil's summoned chrysalis golem and Humphrey's summoned dragon-tooth warriors.

The golem looked like an ogre carved out of diamond. With every attack against it, a rune appeared on one of its many facets. Clive's familiar, Onslow, fired off elemental attacks from the runes on his shell as Clive periodically recharged them with his own mana. Onslow was back next to Clive, as was Belinda's lantern familiar that fires bolts of force at the enemy. Her other familiar, the illusory echo spirit, was dancing around the enemy familiars, distracting and baiting them.

Humphrey's dragon-tooth warriors were normally humanoid figures with bodies of ivory, decked out in conjured equipment provided by his personal space power, magic armoury. In this case, however, the summons were affected by the summoning die Jason had gifted to Humphrey that randomly affected the form of summoned creatures. What

were normally three ivory soldiers were instead a trio of hulking bone gorillas, covered in heavy conjured armour. They even wielded hefty, iron-shod clubs.

The final members of the wall of minions was Stash. Like Gordon, Stash was smarter than the summoned creatures, with the added value of being versatile, like the team to which he belonged. He moved wildly through the brawling familiars and summons, his form rapidly shifting from one shape to another. One moment he was a resilient bark lurker, soaking up an attack aimed at the gorillas. The next he was a darting bird, quickly repositioning.

The summons and familiars on the other side were, like their owners, fast and attack-oriented. A were wolf-like creature fought alongside a sleek metal humanoid figure, covered in sharp edges. There was a ball of needles with chitinous spider legs and a scorpion that fires spines from its stinger. Floating amongst them was a small lantern, projecting shields to protect them. They were outnumbered by the familiars and summons of Jason's team, making little headway beyond forcing Clive, Belinda and Neil to keep an eye on them.

Behind the minion melee was the key reason Valdis' team had not yet managed to regroup. Clive's offensive potential was primarily contained within in a single, potent spell, wrath of the magister. He could charge it up and unleash powerful attacks, on a one minute cooldown. With Belinda's ability to reduce an ability's cooldown by that same amount, both with an ability and her tattoo, Clive unleashed a mana-hungry but incredibly potent series of attacks. As his mana pool was greater than any two of his teammates, however, he had the freedom to do so.

More than anything else of the battlefield, Sigrid was poised to respond to Clive's spell, throwing out her strongest shields to intercept. Even then, the spell burned through protections, forcing Sigrid to follow up with her strongest heals. As with Jason unleashing Colin, it was only the consummate skill and power of Sigrid's healing and shielding that prevented the fight from already being over.

For a while, at least, Belinda's ability to loop Clive's potent spell was a defining force on the battlefield. She even copied the spell and cast it herself when he was done. It was another strategy they hadn't used against Valdis before and his team couldn't be certain how long Clive and Belinda could maintain the barrage. They were too busy to do any more, however, and were forced to endure.

The failure of Jason's team to finish off Sigrid with their ambush was the defining point of the fight, as there was no question she was the most impactful person on the field. Standing bloodied and unbroken with her Valkyrie blond hair, her piercing blue eyes took

in every part of the fight. She was the glue that held her team together in the wake of the enemy's divide and conquer strategy; the critical factor in every part of the battlefield. Through the chaos, she fought desperately to bring her team back into order, barking out directions between spell chants. Their practised teamwork and extensive experience allowed them to make subtle moves to coordinate, even caught up with more immediate concerns.

Jason's team had defined the pace of the fight, but the arrival of Valdis' defender turned the enemy's six on five advantage into an even fight. The defender's cooldowns were finally back up and he erupted into the battlefield at Sigrid's direction. Jason and Sophie were pushed back, Jason not daring to dive into the formation Valdis and his team were falling into. He recalled Shade's bodies to himself as Valdis started attacking them with disruptive-force special attacks.

The reformation of Valdis' team came as they realised that the spell barrage from Clive and Belinda was finally over. They knew they had to seize the moment and turn the tide as Jason had placed them on a clock. Jason's afflictions were past the point that Sigrid could eliminate them while still healing the team. They took one of their sweeping attack formations and started moving on Clive, Belinda and Neil. If they could take out the healer along with Clive before his cooldowns ended, the fight would be over.

Valdis launched forward at the head of his team, flashing a triumphant grin at the chance to finally fight on his own terms. Then he saw an uncharacteristically hungry smile of Humphrey's face and concern flashed through his mind. Sigrid had also intuited that something was wrong but he warning to scatter came too late.

A crystal rod rose up from the ground in the space between the two teams. The air shimmered as tethers of force yanked Valdis' team toward Jason's. Then Jason's team vanished. Cold, dark energy flooded the area, the merest touch opening terrible wounds as their flesh rotted away like it was recoiling.

Belinda's tether had brought the teams close enough for Neil to catch both teams in the six hour cooldown power he obtained from his reaper awakening stone. Reaper's redoubt placed his team safely in a dimensional space and flooded the area with death energy. Given Valdis' team were all afflicted with Jason's necrosis-enhancing curse, it was a finishing move that closed out the fight. In the strange, dark dimensional space of Neil's power, the team started receiving messages.

-
- You defeated [Valdis Volaire].
 - You defeated [Sigrid Freyn].
-

As the most capable members of the team, Valdis and Sigrid had put themselves on the line to cover the others, making them the first to fall. The others soon followed and moments later, awoke in the mirage chamber control room.

Valdis sat up on his platform, glancing between Sigrid and the still bodies of the enemy team still inside. He let out a relaxed laugh.

“That was unexpected,” Sigrid said.

“And just think, Sig,” Valdis told her. “You didn’t want to make friends.”

Chapter 194

Departures

Danielle Geller played the recording of the mirage chamber fight for her important visitor.

“They used my son’s status against him,” the Mirror King said. “It seems your son has picked up your knack for spotting people’s leverage points.”

“No he hasn’t,” Danielle said. “My Humphrey’s a good boy.”

“I see,” the Mirror King said. “You teamed him up with someone who thinks more like you.”

“The man is good at making friends,” Danielle said. “Just ask your son.”

Valdis was deeply regretting his insistence on joining Jason in drinking bronze-rank liquors. It was the farewell party for his team on Jason’s houseboat and when he saw Jason drinking the higher-ranked stuff he had joined in over Jason’s warnings. He didn’t remember anything between that and waking up with a pounding headache and his father at the end of his bed. Now his team were making final farewells on the deck of the houseboat, although he wasn’t saying or listening to anything as he struggled with a throbbing head and unruly stomach.

Valdis and his team were packed and ready to leave via portal, having spent the night in the houseboat after the raucous party. They had only travelled to Greenstone via boat originally because of the arrangements made by Emir. He liked big entrances, as evidenced by the grandiose arrival of his cloud ship days after Hester had quietly portalled him to the city.

There was also the problem of actually opening a portal to Greenstone. Whatever other nuances a dimensional transport power might have, the requirement to have visited the destination was universal. Most of the teams had been portalled as close to Greenstone as their people could reach that was in the path of Emir’s transport ships.

“It’s for the best,” Sigrid told Jason, nodding a head at Valdis. “If he was in a better state then he’d be making a last-minute attempt to poach your team members.”

Valdis looked like he was going to say something, then looked like he was going to throw up, giving up on the former to avoid the latter.

“You’re not going to make a recruiting pitch on his behalf?” Jason asked.

“My job, first and foremost,” she said, “is to keep Valdis out of trouble. You are definitely trouble.”

Jason laughed. "Next time we see you, we'll all be bronze rank. We might come visit that kingdom of yours and give you a chance for revenge in your local mirage chamber."

"You do remember that we repeatedly beat you, right?" Sigrid asked.

"You're only as good as your last fight," Jason said. "That makes us the winners, leaving you to return home in disgrace."

She shook her head. "I still can't fully parse you, Jason Asano. Are you a fool, a genius or a monster?"

"Yes," he said with an impish grin.

Suddenly every member of Valdis' team dropped to one knee, except for Valdis himself. Jason's own team followed a beat later. Jason turned around to find a man standing on the deck that he hadn't sensed, even through his connection to the boat. The man was dressed well but not extravagantly, looking to be somewhere in his late thirties with a neatly-trimmed blond beard.

The man's appearance was unremarkable, but his aura was something else entirely. It was not overwhelming, in fact, just the opposite. Jason could hardly tell where the man's aura stopped and the rest of the world began, as if the very world around him was simply an extension of his power.

Another man walked across the cloud-stuff gangplank and onto the deck from the marina. His positioning and posture marked him as subordinate to the first man, despite his own powerful, gold-rank aura. He was glaring unhappily at Jason.

"You should kneel," he told Jason.

"Why?" Jason asked.

"To show your respect. You stand before the king."

"I've always felt that if someone wants you to kneel, it isn't respect they're after, whatever they might tell you. Also, *the* king? I mean, he's *a* king, I'll grant you. Certainly not my king, though."

"Do you even have monarchs where you come from?" the Mirror King asked. His voice was deep, rich and tinged with amusement.

"Kind of," Jason said. "We sort out our own business, but old folk like to have a royal or two floating about, so we borrow someone else's queen from time to time."

"You borrow a queen?"

"Yep," Jason said. "We pop her over, wheel her down the street so people can have a wave and then send her back. It works out for everyone."

"That's madness," the Mirror King's offsider said. "He's telling strange outworlder stories to disrespect you."

The Mirror King laughed. “What he’s doing is poking the nest to see how aggressive the wasps are. You remind me of Danielle Geller when she was young and precocious.”

“Thank you,” Jason said.

“You’ll have to forgive my friend Hastor,” the Mirror King said. “Among his varied and valuable roles is protocol officer, at which he very much excels.”

“Thank you, your majesty.”

“Sadly,” the Mirror King continued, “the traits that makes him an excellent protocol officer serve him less well in more informal settings. If there isn’t a chart so seat everyone in the room by relative rank, he starts getting snippy.”

“Your majesty!” Hastor protested.

At that moment, Valdis, who had been lurking behind Jason, lost his battle with his stomach. Lurching to the side of the deck, he vomited loudly over the side.

“Good thing I ranked up by poison resist power,” Jason confided in the Mirror King. “It soaked up just the right amount of alcohol. Also, I apparently don’t have a stomach. I was going to ask my mate Clive about it – that’s Clive kneeling there – but I figured the answer would be pretty gross. Which may sound odd, coming from the guy with the flesh-rotting powers, but there you go.”

“It seems my son has learned a lesson about limitations,” the mirror King said with a chuckle. “Those can be hard to find for princes.”

Valdis staggered forward to stand next to Jason.

“Dad,” Valdis croaked in greeting. The Mirror King gave his son a wry smile.

“Having fun?”

Valdis let out a wordless groan and the Mirror King chuckled again.

“Thank you for putting up with my son, Mr Asano. I think it’s time to go.”

“No worries, your kingness. And you can call me Jason.”

The Mirror King grinned and threw an arm around his son’s shoulders, who groaned.

“Come along, boy; you can explain the state you’re into your mother. If you would, Hastor?”

Hastor called up a portal that looked like a sheet of glass and the Mirror King marched his son through. Just before he passed through, Valdis shared a put-upon look with a grinning Jason, departing with a wave. Once the king was gone, Jason and Valdis’ teams stood up, Sigrid politely moving to greet Hastor. The disgruntled look on Hastor’s softened with their brief and formal, yet somehow still warm interaction.

“It’s good to see you, father,” Sigrid said after her formal greeting.

“Wait, this guy’s your Dad?”

“He is my father,” Sigrid confirmed.

“And he doesn’t get a hug? That’s cold.”

Sigrid giggled, shaking her head.

“Thank you for the hospitality,” she said to Jason’s team. “I look forward to the next time we meet.”

She led the rest of her team through the portal, leaving only Hastor with Jason and his team.

“Thank you,” Hastor said, to Jason’s surprise. “While I cannot agree with your gross deficit in etiquette, the young Prince doesn’t have a lot of friends who will stand beside him instead of kneel.”

Hastor didn’t wait for a response, stepping through his portal, which vanished.

“That was unexpected,” Jason said. “So, Emir’s portal lady is Hester, and that guy’s portal guy was Hastor,” he mused. “Are portal powers a name thing?”

“Of course not,” Clive said. “You need to watch your decorum around royalty.”

“Do I?” Jason asked. “I was more thinking that I need to get powerful enough that they have to watch their decorum around me.”

The keg of crystal wash was much larger than the cloud flask, yet Jason emptied it into the flask without any sign of the flask being full. He had returned the houseboat to the flask in preparation for their departure, which left Rufus and Gary once again stripped of accommodation for the duration of the road contract. With the conflict with the Builder cult at an uneasy pause, Gary and Rufus turned to other endeavours. Gary would be rejoining Emir at Sky Scar Lake, while Rufus would lodge at the Geller estate as he refocused his attention on the training annex project.

The fight against the Builder cult was at a lull after the raid on their island outpost and the Purity church was in something of a limbo while everyone waited for word from on high, be that the main branches of the churches or the gods themselves. In the meantime, the church of Purity’s people were comfortably but thoroughly detained under the authority of the ecumenical council.

Once he had drained the cask of crystal wash, restoring the cleaning functions of his magical abode, it was time to head out. It was a short walk from the marina to the loop line station for Jason and his team, which carried them to the Adventure Society campus. Waiting for them outside the jobs hall was Humphrey’s sister, Henrietta.

Henrietta was a statuesque and handsome woman whose short-cropped hair swept back dramatically. In practical leathers and with a dimensional bag slung over her shoulder

she had the confident ease of an experienced adventurer. Her eyes were a bright shade of purple, a sure sign of a summoned familiar inhabiting them. Belinda's lantern familiar, Shimmer was likewise subsumed into her eyes, turning them silver instead of purple.

Henrietta was a minion specialist and Jason knew that she would have her three summoned familiars inside her body. Her fourth familiar was bonded to her like Stash was to Humphrey. It was a phoenix, the classic variety native to the desert. Rare and elusive, people lived whole lives and died out in the desert without ever seeing one. It was a gorgeous creature with feathers like living fire, which stood out even when familiars were a common sight. As the phoenix could not disguise itself the way Stash could, she largely left the mystical bird to its own devices, since she was always able to sense and communicate with it.

Summoned familiars had a number of practical advantages over bonded types, but the bond was not without its perks. A bonded familiar could be sensed at all times in a way summoned familiars only could be while subsumed within the summoner, which was not a practical advantage. The closest Jason had to this was Shade and his three bodies. While Shade's other bodies were out and about, Jason could sense them so long as at least one copy of Shade took the place of his own shadow. It also helped make Shade a useful spy.

"I've already picked up the contract," Henrietta said. "Let's head out."

Every road contract consisted of a group of iron-rankers, usually a team, with a supervising bronze ranker. In the current, uncertain times, Henrietta had appointed herself to look after her brother and his team. Danielle had also made sure Henrietta had certain expensive magical consumables to use in a pinch.

The team turned around and headed back for the loop line. After leaving the station, they prepared to head out for the desert. Clive had arranged for a heavy duty skimmer that could handle rocky terrain to be waiting for them at the edge of the delta. Skimmers specialised to sand were relatively cheap, but the magic that kept them aloft became less effective over less smooth, sweeping area. Knowing they would be ranging far and wide, Clive had requisitioned a more robust model designed for all kinds of terrain.

To get to the Magic Society outpost at the edge of the delta, the team started deploying their various means of transport. After returning from the trip to Jayapura, the team had new means of transportation available to them.

Humphrey already had Stash, who would happily transform into a heidel. Stash didn't like the colour of regular heidels though, leaving Humphrey riding a bright pink animal. Jason's familiar mount was Shade, who could transform each of his three bodies into horses due to Jason's dark rider power.

The hair of each horse was black, with white, glowing hooves, eyes and mane. White mist, shining against the black coat of the horses rose up from the hooves. Jason would have been satisfied so long as Shade didn't turn into a heidel, but what delighted with the glorious form he took.

"Looking sexy, Shade."

"I believe," Shade said, "that comment is inappropriate on numerous levels."

Clive had purchased a floating disc during their trip away. It was much the same as the ones they had used in Jayapura, but could function in low-magic areas like Greenstone. As with most such cases, it required someone with a special power to use magical tools to function.

Neil has no such power and no shape-changing familiar. He ended up in a floating trolley, towed behind Clive by a magical tether.

"This doesn't feel dignified," Neil said as Clive towed him along like a child. He looked over at Henrietta, riding a heidel-like construct creature, strangely crafted from what looked like folded paper. It would not hold up to the rigours of combat but could fold itself down small enough to carry in a pocket, like a two-headed origami horse.

"I should have bought one of those," he lamented. He had seen them for sale in the Mystic Quarter in Jayapura but had balked at the price. Given the money he still had from the essence auctions, he was now regretting his own prudence.

"I watched the recording of your fight with that Prince and his team," Henrietta said as they rode through the city streets.

"What did you think?" Neil asked. "Beating that team is impressive, right?"

"Impressive?" Henrietta asked dismissively. "It was a travesty. You lined your familiars and summons out like they were bricks in a wall. Do you have any idea how much potential you squandered?"

Henrietta had already spent some time with the team, training them in the use of their familiars and summons. She was, it turned out, unhappy with the results.

"During this trip I'm going to drill you all until you stop wasting your familiars. Jason is the only one of you even starting to use his familiars properly and he still has a long way to go."

"Thank you," Jason said.

"I wouldn't get too happy," Henrietta said. "Your performance was only decent compared to the rest of this lot. You left one of your familiars standing around with the others, too. You'll be drilling as hard as anyone."

"I don't mind a bit of hard work," Jason said.

Henrietta grinned at him.

“You will when I’m done with you.”

They were making their way down Broadstreet Boulevard, one of the main artery roads between the Island and Old City’s north east gate when they all felt a surging aura. Looking in that direction, they could see rainbow light shining over the rooftops from several streets away.

“A manifestation,” Henrietta said darkly. “Right in the middle of the city.”

“Maybe it’ll just be an awakening stone,” Neil said.

“Not with light display of that size,” Clive said. “That’s a monster. Probably silver rank.”

“Silver rank?” Neil said. “Do we go?”

“Of course we go,” Jason said. “We’re adventurers.”

“I’m not,” Belinda said. “I haven’t had my assessment, yet. Does that mean I get to not go?”

Jason flashed her a grin. “No.”

He urged his shadow horse to a gallop, roaring ahead of the group. Trailing behind him was the sound of hooves on the packed earth of the street, mixed with the sound of Shade’s voice.

“I would like to remind you that I can talk. You could just ask me to go faster instead of digging in with your heels.”

Chapter 195

No Pot of Gold

The people of Old City were reacting in one of two ways to the rainbow light shining in the air. Many were fleeing as fast as they could, rushing past Jason and his team as they rode toward the source of the commotion. Other members of the populace were trying to find a spot to watch from a safe distance. At worst, they would get to see some adventurers in action. Even better would be if it turned out to be an essence. Maybe they would even have a chance at grabbing it for themselves.

Jason and his team were not the only adventurers in the area to come running. There was another team of iron-rankers in full gear, plus a handful of people with iron and bronze-rank auras that, from their casual clothes, were just in the area on civilian business. Jason and his team dismounted their various means of transport.

“Once the monster manifests,” Henrietta said, “everyone follow my direction. If there are lower-rank secondary monsters I’ll have at least some of you on them. Otherwise I’ll put you on crowd-wrangling. The onlookers won’t be willing to go until things get dangerous, so we’ll need to keep them from panicking and trampling one another.”

The rainbow light turned out to be emerging from the ground. Chunks of street had broken apart and were floating in the air like dandelions on a breeze as the light rose up from the holes left behind. The assembled adventurers moved up to peer into the holes, seeing through the light that there was a good-sized space below.

“Some kind of hub for the water utility tunnels,” Clive said, taking a stone tablet out of his personal storage space. The magical map etched into it shifted as he pushed his fingers across the surface of the tablet.

“That’s troubling,” Clive said after finding what he was looking for. “There’s a wastewater treatment hub right underneath here. It’s probably been damaged by a manifestation his strong.”

“You think that’s troubling?” Jason asked. “I think you’re missing the main point.”

“What do you mean?” Clive asked.

“Monsters take forms according to their environment, right?”

“Oh,” Clive said, realisation dawning.

“What is it?” Henrietta asked.

“There’s no pot of gold at the end of this rainbow,” Jason said, “I think we’re about to fight a poo monster.”

Even as he said it, filthy water started geysering up from the holes in the ground. The gathered crowd started recoiling loudly as gobbets of viscous water rained from the sky,

bringing with it a terrible stench. Jason quickly pulled out his magic umbrella and the wastewater rain avoided the bubble that formed around him. Belinda and Sophie immediately ducked into the bubble with him as the others looked on in envy as they were rapidly drenched in filth.

“I think we might need another keg of crystal wash,” Jason said.

The splashing water did not lay inert after landing. Like a living creature it crawled over the ground, buildings and even people it landed on, seeking to congeal into pools.

“The rain is the monster,” Henrietta called out. “Some kind of elemental.”

As the rain congealed into pools, the pools started radiating auras. The biggest pool was condensing a silver-rank aura, the smaller ones either bronze or iron.

“Start attacking if you have anything that will be effective,” Henrietta called out, not just for Jason’s team but all the assembled adventurers. “Anything explosive or any resonating-force powers will be most effective against a water-type elemental. Avoid ice or anything else water-based it can absorb unless you can freeze and shatter all at once.”

Elementals were forming anywhere that the water was pooling, from the middle of the street to the flat rooftops and even on shopfront awnings. Globulous masses of thick, rancid liquid congealed into gelatinous chunks, until an accumulated pile started undulating in the direction the closest living thing. They oozed across the ground, spilled over walls and tipped out of whatever the wastewater had been accumulating in, splattering to the ground. Jason spotted one elemental secrete its way out of a fruit cart, flowing between the fruit like some unholy juice.

“Like a less-awful kale smoothie,” he muttered to himself.

Gordon, who inhabited Jason’s aura, was much easier to draw out than Colin, who lived his bloodstream. All Jason had to do was project his aura the right way for Gordon to appear at his side and soon blue and orange beams of force were gouging their way through elementals.

Jason’s afflictions would be worthless against the elementals own powers so he drew his sword, although he knew he would be more use directed elsewhere.

“I’ll be better off on crowd control,” he told Henrietta. “This is a bad match-up for me.” Henrietta nodded.

“You know your team better than me,” she told him. “Set the roles.”

Jason had Sophie join him on crowd wrangling as her speed was more useful than her fists against the ambulatory sewerage monsters. The others he assigned to a elemental hunting. Humphrey’s powerful attacks could smash an elemental apart, rendering the magically-infused water inert once more. Clive had his legendary staff tucked under one arm and his legendary wand in the other hand, blasting out force energy

from both. Neil kept an eye on the whole field, shielding and healing anyone who needed it, from their own team to other adventurers and civilians. Belinda chained her force tether to collect elementals together where all the adventurers could lay on area attacks.

The other adventurers had also leapt into action as elementals emerged across the sprawling area of streets, alleys and rooftops where the wastewater rain had fallen. That included Henrietta, who called her familiars into play. She let out a breath that became a dervish of ash and cinders that charged into the liquid elementals, evaporating them into clouds of foul, choking steam.

Purple light poured out of Henrietta's eyes, from which manifested a huge, bizarre floating eye, held aloft by leathery wings on each side of the orb. It flew around projecting a beam of purple energy that blasted apart the elementals. The last familiar was a lantern emitting soft green light that healed any living thing it encountered. She sent it floating off in search of civilians caught up and isolated by elementals.

Even Henrietta's previously absent phoenix appeared, diving out of the sky like a burning spear. In a series of swooping strikes it punched through elementals, their watery bodies exploding with sprays of filth and steam.

Having put her familiars to work, Henrietta employed a power not unlike Clive's ability to draw ritual circles. Hers, however was specifically for summoning creatures. Where most people would have to lay out a circle of salt or other appropriate substance, she drew a simple magic circle in the air with her finger, which was traced out in silver-blue light. She was done in moments and the circle transmuted into a shimmering portal, through which came one summon after another.

The first was a crow made of golden fire, superficially similar to the phoenix but formed entirely from golden flames with burning red eyes. It soared out of the portal and joined the phoenix in its swooping strikes. Next through the portal was a winged centaur, clad in armour and carrying a shield and lance. It galloped into the fray, smashing apart elementals with sweeping shield bashed and crashing blows from its own wings, used as bludgeons.

The third entity to come out looked like a strange, dark angel. It had no arms but four wings, two black and two white. Around it floated four disembodied hands. It flew into the air, looming over the chaos and started sending out the floating hands. Where they touched an ally, the ally was healed. Where they touched an elemental, the elemental was desiccated. The hand would push into the elemental as it reduced down to a dry, hard nugget of waste before floating off again.

The final one was a golem made of crude iron, glowing with internal heat. Similar to the forge golem Jason had seen Gary summon in the past, this furnace golem had flames behind the metal grill in its torso, rather than molten metal.

There was no shortage of elementals to go after as more and more kept forming. The geysering wastewater continued unabated and the filth rain kept coming down. As some focused on eliminating the elementals as quickly as possible, Jason, Sophie and some of the other adventurers spread out to help people. The rain had come down further afield than anyone had anticipated, seeping under doors and into the buildings around them.

After designating roles, Jason couldn't spare any more attention to what the rest of the team was doing. He used the voice chat to keep in touch, but mostly it was left clear for Humphrey, Clive, Belinda and Neil to coordinate.

It was his evolved map ability that he relied on the most, which now had the ability to pick out friends, enemies and neutrals. Jason ran around, Gordon trailing behind. Jason kept one of Shade's bodies with him to communicate with the two he sent scouting. The mana draining power of Shade's even turned out to be effective against the elementals, which were basically magically-infused physical matter. Draining the magic out of them had a strongly deleterious impact on their integrity.

He fought elementals as he had to, with his sword and proving sufficiently effective. It was sufficient to at least extricate people from where they had been boxed up so he could find them a path out of the rain. He relied mostly on his familiars to begin with as he accumulated power on his sword until it was slicing through elementals at a blow.

People were scattered, panicking and making all the wrong decisions. Elementals were coming into their homes and businesses, they were running exactly the wrong way and it was generally like herding cats in a thunderstorm.

With the spread of people and the rain coming down a whole range of streets, alleys and buildings, he didn't always reach people in time. Some he found dead, drowned in viscous filth. He didn't have time to reflect on how inured he had become to death, already looking for the next person he could save.

It seemed like the geysering wastewater would never come to an end. More and more of the foul fluid poured into the sky, raining down to form yet-more elementals. The smaller, iron-rank ones coalesced first, followed by the larger bronze-rank ones. The adventurers had mostly cleared out the panicking innocents by the time the largest pool congealed into a towering silver-rank elemental. At the height of a two-storey building, it loomed over the adventurers battling its lesser kin. Fortunately its formation finally saw the geyser of filth peter out.

More adventurers had arrived as the battle continued. Henrietta and the other bronze-rankers were gearing up to confront the giant elemental when the first silver-ranker arrived. With dark, waving hair, broad shoulders and huge hammer, he leapt from the roof of a nearby building. He had arrived after the filth rain stopped but was quickly coated in muck as great chunks exploded off the elemental with each swing of his giant hammer. It was a huge lump of metal, even the handle, but he waved it about as if it weighed no more than a stick.

The arrival of the silver ranker and the end of the rain forming new elementals signalled the turning point of the fight. Each rank of adventurer turned to the matching rank of elementals, which were cleaned up in short order. In the wake of the battle, the adventurers gathered up, mostly covered in filth. A few had shielding abilities that protected them, while others were already using crystal wash or similar items to clean themselves. Jason tossed a bottle of crystal wash to the silver ranker who was now covered in muck.

“Thanks,” the adventurer said as he tipped the bottle over his head, which restored his square-jawed handsomeness and lustrous, wavy hair. “From that cloak you’re wearing, I’m guessing you’re the Jason Asano people have been talking about.”

“That’s me,” Jason said as the adventurer looked over the team forming around Jason. His eyes fell on Sophie and Belinda.

“That would make one of you two Sophie Wexler?”

“Why would you have heard of me?” Sophie asked as she took one of the crystal wash bottles Jason was handing out.

“The Adventure Society director had a friend of mine following you around in secret for months. He was the one quietly intervening to help you avoid being caught. He wasn’t allowed to talk about it at the time, of course. A bit ethically shaky, but there you go.”

“I met him briefly,” Jason said.

“Oh, I know,” the adventurer said with a laugh. “You got him told off, so he hates you.”

Henrietta approached the group, nodding to the silver-rank adventurer.

“That was good timing, Bert.”

“Henry, It’s been a while,” the adventurer greeted back.

“Wait,” Jason said. “You’re Bertrand Bertinelli?”

“You can call me Bert,” Bertrand said.

“Wow,” Jason said. “You really are the handsome one.”

Chapter 196

The Glory of Success or the Price of Failure

Bertrand was the ranking adventurer, which made reporting the elemental manifestation to the Adventure Society his responsibility. As he was a latecomer to the incident, Henrietta diligently filled in the blanks in his knowledge. The team was happy to leave sorting out the mess of the filth-coated streets to him. Civilian casualties need to be tallied and reported and repairs and cleanup organised. Through some meteorological quirk of magic, it never rained in Greenstone. All the waste would need to be cleaned off before it dried into the walls. If nothing else, the untreated wastewater would pose a health risk if not dealt with.

Bertrand was commandeering the services of some of the other adventurers present as they left. Their travel contract fortuitously exempted them, as they had a schedule to keep. They left the city and made their way along the coast road towards the northern edge of the delta.

"I'm told that given the events of recent months," Henrietta told them, "some of the more remote areas haven't been getting the attention they should. Not all of the villages were covered in the last two months by adventurers, which has apparently led to casualties from iron-rank monsters that have reached the berserk stage. Bronze-rank monsters that spawned in that period won't have reached that stage yet, so we can anticipate a higher than normal number of them on noticeboards."

"We're going to fight bronze-rank monsters?" Belinda asked. As the newest and only non-adventurer on their team, her face reflected an understandable uncertainty.

"My role is primarily a supervisory one," Henrietta said. "While with a less capable group the bronze ranker might engage in more active leadership, this is a chance for you to show not just ability but also judgement."

"Meaning we choose whether to face off against a bronze-rank monster ourselves or turn to you," Neil said.

"Precisely," Henrietta said. "My role is to step in when I determine your ability or judgement has failed and the danger has become unacceptable."

"If these remote areas we'll be visiting have been this neglected," Jason said, "then I imagine there have been messengers sent to lodge complaints."

"There have," Henrietta said.

"I'm willing to bet Arella picked out a route where we'll be cleaning up messes for her, leaving us to face up to some unhappy townsfolk."

“Assuming that’s all she does,” Neil said. “Her father’s a crime boss and she hates you, Asano. I’m more concerned she’ll try and have you bumped off out here, catching the rest of us in the middle.”

“Arella has a vested interest in keeping me alive, at this point,” Jason said. “She barely held onto her position and the support of the Remore family was a large part of that. Not to mention that Humphrey and Henrietta are with us. Their mother has not been happy with Arella since the expedition, and if Danielle suspected her of endangering her children, Arella might just vanished and never be heard from again. That said, I’ve assumed Arella would make the smart choice before and paid the price for that assumption. It might not hurt to keep an extra eye out.”

“She won’t do anything,” Henrietta said. “My mother bullied her way into supervising the development of our schedule. She also provided Humphrey and myself with certain resources to rely on in critical moments.”

“Assuming no one else got the schedule and decided to bury Asano out in the desert,” Neil said. “Not everyone appreciates his cavalier disregard for rank and social standing. Even if he hadn’t ticked-off certain crime lords, which he has, Lucian Lamprey has well-known criminal connections. I also know for a fact that certain elders in the Mercer family really hate him.”

“What for?” Jason asked. “Are they still annoyed that I had the temerity to have a relationship with Cassandra?”

“It was never about you, Asano. It’s internal family politics. The Mercer family elders are used to being in charge and they weren’t happy when Lady Thalia came back to Greenstone from adventuring. She carved off a chunk of their influence just from turning up. They knew Thalia approved of you and Cassandra as a match, so they pushed the family to force you apart as a show of strength. They made a big deal of you not being good enough and Thalia not thinking of the family.”

“I see it,” Jason said. “They shoo me away from their precious scion because I’m some nobody, then suddenly I’m swanning about with visiting royalty, gold-rankers and even gods. Thalia looks prescient for championing me when I was a nobody and they look like fools for pushing away someone whose star is on the rise.”

“That’s basically it,” Neil said. “You don’t actually matter to them, but they resent you anyway.”

“Hold on, Asano,” Henrietta said. “You and Cassandra Mercer?”

“Jason and her were together for while,” Humphrey said. “Until her family pushed her to end it.”

“Wow, Cassandra Mercer,” Henrietta said. “I’m envious.”

“Henry!” Humphrey said.

“What?” Henrietta asked. “Have you not seen Cassandra Mercer? She’s smart and fun. She was also ridiculously gorgeous, even before she had essences.”

“You know her?” Jason asked.

“I did, before we both went off adventuring. Our mothers are friends and we’re the same age, so we drifted around the periphery of the same social events.”

Despite being the senior figure, Henrietta wasn’t amongst the older members of the group. She was twenty one compared to Clive, who was at almost thirty, Jason at twenty-four, plus Sophie and Belinda, both about a year younger than Jason.

“How is any of that Mercer family business Asano’s fault?” Sophie asked. “They just tried to use and dismiss him and now they’re annoyed he’s successful?”

“This is one of the problems with aristocracy,” Jason said. “If you teach someone that everyone else only exists for their benefit, you can’t be surprised when they start using people as if they don’t matter.”

“As an aristocrat,” Humphrey said, “I think the issue is more nuanced than that.”

“Humphrey,” Sophie said. “Every problem Lindy and I ever had was something you never had to deal with, because you were born in a big estate. When Asano came along and gave me enough essences that I can be here today, that was something I never imagined having. Something incredible and life-changing. But for you, there was never any doubt that not only would you get essences, but you would have your pick.”

“Jason, have you been poisoning Sophie with your politics?” Humphrey asked.

“Humphrey, were you not listening?” Jason asked. “We know you’re one of the good ones. We’ve all seen how hard you work to deserve the things you have, but if you slacked off and did nothing, you’d still have them. The problem of aristocracy is that deserve’s got nothing to do with it.”

“Things aren’t as simple as you make out,” Humphrey said.

“They never are,” Jason said. “That doesn’t obviate the fundamentals problems.”

“You seem to know a lot about Mercer family politics,” Henrietta said to Neil, sharply heading off the political discussion with a forceful change of topic.

“While we were doing all that training,” Neil said, following Henrietta’s lead, “I was finding the time where I could to take tea with Thadwick’s family. I think they like having someone who knows him to talk to. There aren’t a lot of those who don’t completely hate him.”

“I think more will hate him, by the time this all plays out,” Clive said.

“What do you mean?” Neil asked.

“I’m the closest thing we have to a star seed expert in Greenstone,” Clive said. “I was consulted as to Thadwick being seeded again when the Builder cult demonstrated so much insider knowledge of Mercer family operations during their supply raids. The thing is, the timeline from when Thadwick was retaken to when the raids began is too short. The seed would have needed longer to supplant his original personality to the point he gave up such important family secrets.”

“You’re suggesting Thadwick gave up the information voluntarily,” Jason said.

“That would make sense,” Neil said. “Thadwick’s family got awkward a couple of times when we were talking and I didn’t realise why at the time. If they already knew what you just told us, that explains a lot.”

“Of course I told them,” Clive said. “They deserved to know more than anyone.”

“You think he threw in with the cultists?” Belinda asked.

“Not even Thadwick would fall that low,” Jason said. “They already captured and implanted one of those things in him once. Even he wouldn’t be stupid enough to volunteer for another go around.”

“You think they just tortured the information out of him?” Henrietta said.

“It would make sense,” Humphrey said. “I don’t like to speak ill of a man probably in terrible circumstances, right now, but he seems like someone who would give up under interrogation rather quickly.”

“And so he should,” Jason said. “Everyone’s going to break eventually, so you might as well save yourself the torture. I would.”

“You’d give up information under torture?” Humphrey asked.

“Why wait?” Jason. “I’d give up under the threat of torture. I don’t want to get tortured. I’d crack like an egg.”

They made their way along the coast road, afternoon closing in on evening as they got closer to the dividing line where the delta met the desert. The Magic Society maintained outposts at the edge of the delta where spirit coin shipments were inspected before being handed over from adventurer escorts the Duke of Greenstone’s people for transport into the city. The plan was to stay one of the outposts overnight before heading into the desert in the morning.

They knew they were getting closer as the delta showed signs of drying out. Conversation turned to the silver-rank elemental that appeared in the city and whether it was a sign of the monster surge finally beginning.

“There are certainly signs,” Clive said. “A monster surge is kind of like water building up behind a dam, except with magic. If too much builds up before being sluiced out – in the form of a monster surge – you end up with some flooding when it finally does. The fact that so many subordinate monsters appeared alongside the silver-ranked one indicates that there’s a significant build up. Being an elemental is another indicator. Elementals are basically just ordinary materials infused with magic, which is why so much material was left behind, even after all the elementals were looted and went up in rainbow smoke. That kind of monster manifestation is more common as magic builds up before a surge.”

With Both Neil and Jason on hand, plenty of looting went on in the wake of the elemental fight. Mostly it turned out water and corrupt quintessence, but also a corrupt essence from the largest elemental. That loot was Bertand’s, given he killed it, and he was going to hand it over to the Adventure Society as it was on the restricted essence list.

“Does that mean there can be a dam break situation?” Jason asked. “I kind of assumed that was what the monster surges were.”

“That sounds bad,” Neil said.

“The monster surges are part of our world’s natural magical cycles,” Clive said. “That’s why I compared the to a sluice being opened, because they are part of the normal functioning. A dam break would be such a mass of magic building up without release that, like a dam break, it would fundamentally damage the structure of the world. The dam, in this case, is the membrane between our physical reality and the astral. Permanent damage to that membrane would be very, very bad, yes.”

“What would that look like?” Henrietta asked.

“I can’t be sure,” Clive said. “It would open our world up to astral forces from which it’s normally protected, but the results of that are pure conjecture. The idea has been thrown around, but not in any serious capacity because it just shouldn’t happen. The natural venting process of the monster surge would kick-in well before reaching that point. It would only be possible with some kind of outside intervention, but we’re talking about a world-altering power scale. People have bandied around ideas about how that might work because surges have been taking longer to arrive but that is conspiratorial rubbish. We don’t even have the beginnings of the kind of astral magic that would take.”

“Don’t we?” Jason asked. “How’s that extra reading I gave you going?”

“Jason, it’s a big jump between some new revelations in astral magic and altering the magic of a whole world. It just isn’t possible.”

“Clive,” Jason said. “A year ago I didn’t know magic was real. The moment that I accepted that it was – really accepted that it was – I realised that there is no such thing as impossible.”

Humphrey gave Jason an assessing look.

“I think I just came a little closer to figuring out how you think,” he told Jason.

“I wouldn’t try that, if I were you,” Neil said. “Getting inside that mind is like putting your hand in the fire.”

“Or a trap,” Sophie added.

“You don’t know that,” Jason said. “Come, Neil, and bathe in the comforting warmth of my thoughts.”

“I’d rather bathe in that turd elemental,” Neil said, the group laughing at Jason’s mock-hurt expression.

“You never answered the original question, Clive” Sophie said. “Do you think this is the start of a monster surge?”

“Maybe,” Clive said. “Roaming around during a monster surge is like travelling the in the astral space city where the Reaper trials were conducted. You won’t go much more than an hour or two without some monster jumping you and we’ve been riding all afternoon without incident. This might be some kind of flare-up as a precursor to the surge, but those can happen weeks, even months ahead.”

“So, it’s just another monster manifestation?” Sophie asked.

“I know it feels like it means something because the monster appeared in the city, but that is just us ascribing meaning that isn’t there. To a monster manifestation, the city means nothing. It’s no more or no less likely to appear in a city as anywhere else, but when it appears in the city instead of the wilderness, it feels different to us. That’s why the inclination is to see it as somehow different, when it isn’t. Being a silver-rank manifestation just adds to that, but they do happen here, albeit rarely.”

“How long can it take between surges?” Belinda asked. “What’s the record?”

“Just under fourteen years,” Clive said. “That was a famously bad one. It’s over twelve and counting, this time.”

“Maybe I’m just overthinking it,” Humphrey said. “With everything that’s happening with the Builder cult and the church of Purity, I can’t help but feel all this is building up to something. Something bigger than what we’ve seen.”

“Let’s hope not,” Henrietta said. “You know that not everywhere has managed to stop the cult of the Builder. Most of the big places found and shut them down, but there have been towns and rural areas wiped out when the local astral spaces were ripped off the

side of our world. My team scouted one out before we split up to go protect our home towns. The outskirts were devastated, like a hurricane had passed through. The actual area itself was worse. There was nothing left. No plants, no building, no life. Just a huge, gaping hole in the landscape.”

“How big an area?” Neil asked.

“The size of a lake,” Henrietta said. “A big one. You’ve all heard of the legend of Sky Scar Lake? That a god made it to punish some sinners that were living there? That’s what it was like, as if some god came down and scooped the land out.”

“That’s horrifying,” Belinda said.

“Mostly it’s been small places,” Henrietta said. “Rural areas or even wilderness where there aren’t enough, if any, adventurers to find and stop them. Word came in just yesterday of a city of twelve thousand people being lost. It’s the biggest so far, and no one thinks the cultists are done.”

“I didn’t realise things were so bad,” Neil said.

“You have to realise that Greenstone isn’t a priority compared to the rest of the world,” Henrietta said. “You’re only seeing the periphery of a larger conflict. The cult has been largely blunted here and there’s only so much more damage they can do.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Clive said. “We know from Jason’s familiar that some people stayed behind when the astral space was resealed,” Clive said. “Emir and his people have been looking for a way back inside.”

Jason stayed quiet. He had put the issue of getting back inside the astral space to Shade, who had said it was a possibility, but not yet. The astral space had originally been stabilised by Shade’s former summoner, who used his own essence abilities as a foundation for much of the infrastructure. That meant installing his own familiar as an administrator and building the archway portals based on his teleportation ability, path of shadows.

Shade had postulated that once Jason’s own path of shadows power reached bronze rank and could open portals, then between it, Shade’s own knowledge of the infrastructure and a sufficiently skilled astral magic specialist, it might be possible to send people back into the astral space. Jason had, thus far, not shared this with anyone, as there were no guarantees. Opening his mouth now would just put a target on his back as the cult tried to kill him off before he ranked his power up.

“Coming back here is a risk,” Timos said.

“Our situation is desperate,” Zato said.

Jin Zato was the last silver-ranker left in the Builder cult's local forces. Tasked with leading the evacuation when their island stronghold was invaded, he was able to escape with a good number of their people. None of his fellow silver-rankers made it through, however, leaving him in the position of leadership. Along with the church of Purity members working directly with them, they had decamped to the former Vane Estate.

"They know we've used this place in the past," Timos said.

"Our people still embedded in Greenstone, what few we have, confirmed that they already checked this place and believe we abandoned it," Zato said.

"And if they decided to check again, having smoked us from our last hiding hole?"

"Then the consequences will still be less severe than continued failure. The astral space Bahadir's people opened up is our last chance to prove ourselves to the leadership. Have you seen what they do to those who prove themselves more liability than asset?"

"Recycling," Timos said with a shudder. "I haven't seen it myself, but I've heard stories."

"We both have star seeds within us," Zato said. "There's no running or hiding. Only the glory of success or the price of failure. We need the infrastructure we left hidden here if we're going to claim that astral space."

They had arrived in what was once the underground ritual room of Landemere Vane and were working to create the portal that they needed. All the former contents had been stripped out, even the plaster on the walls and the wood on the floor, revealing hewn stone. Moulded into the stone of the floor was a breathtakingly intricate magical circle made of brass. They had created it by carving channels into the stone floor and pouring in molten metal. At the centre of the circle was a crude archway made of piled bricks, each of which had glyphs carved into every visible side.

"Our people inside the astral space have successfully planted the beacon," Zato said. "As soon as we detected it we were able to target it and start establishing the astral bridge. Once it's complete and the portal opens, everyone goes through."

"Everyone?" Timos asked.

"When the Builder claims the disconnected astral space, we shall be there, triumphantly arriving with the latest addition to his world. In any case, you do not want to be left here. Did you see the final estimations of how destructive claiming that astral space would be?"

"Not the final ones," Timos said. "I knew its unusual nature made it different. Last I heard was that it would devastate Greenstone."

“The knowledge used to secure that astral space to this world was obtained by the Reaper from the Builder himself,” Zato said. “Breaking those bonds will have a terrifying backlash. We need to take all our people, if only because Greenstone and everything else within a hundred kilometres of Sky Scar Lake will cease to exist.”

Timos’ past was littered with the dead he left behind him, yet that level of destruction gave even him pause.

“How many people will that kill?” he asked.

“Does it matter?” Zato asked.

“I suppose not,” Timos said. His flash of compassion was a flickering candle flame, quickly snuffed out. “Can we leave Thadwick behind?”

Chapter 197

Adequate

Jason took one look at the spartan dormitory of the Magic Society outpost and pulled out his cloud flask. The low, blocky building of desert stone contained little more than hard cots.

He chose the adaptive version of the cloud house and mist started spilling out of the flask. It formed into five small buildings in a ring, similar on the outside to the dormitories and connected by covered walkways. Inside was a very different story, with the soft, luxurious cloud-stuff interiors to which they had all become accustomed.

“This is very indulgent,” Henrietta said after her first night in the cloud house. Three of the five buildings were bedrooms, while the last two had a kitchen and dining room in one and a lounge with bar in the other.

“You’re free to pitch a tent outside, if you think it’ll make you soft,” Jason told her.

“It’s my responsibility to remain with the team,” she said hastily.

“We can expect to have a lot of work,” Henrietta said after they set off the next morning. Their planned route was to move north, checking in on the villages along the coast before turning deep inland and working their way back south before taking the river back to the city.

“The further we go, the more we should find overloaded adventure board notices,” Henrietta warned. “In some instances I’ll be splitting the team into two groups to cover more than one notice at a time, but no more than two. We want to keep at least some safety in numbers.”

“There’s a village on our list today,” Jason said. “Last time I saw it, it was a complete ruin. It’ll be good to see it rebuilt.”

“What happened to it?” Belinda ask. “Storm, or monster attack?”

“A tidal troll,” Jason said, “although it looked like a hurricane had passed through. This was just after Clive and I caught you and Sophie. Humphrey and Neil were off on the expedition and I took the contract alone. It was my first solo bronze-rank monster, and the first one I fought on purpose.”

“You took down a tidal troll alone?” Henrietta asked. “They’re tough and strong, even for bronze rank monsters. Humphrey and his might essence will be close to silver rank before he can match it.”

“They’re slow, though,” Jason said. “Big, slow and no weird powers. That made it the perfect enemy for me. Lots of surface area for Colin to latch onto.”

“I can see that,” Henrietta said. “If you were going slow and steady with the afflictions, though, it must have been hard to keep it out of the water.”

“It wasn’t what you’d call a fast mover,” Jason said. “By the time it ran for the ocean it was too late. I used my execute to close it out before the troll crossed the beach.”

“You’re the first focused affliction specialist I’ve met,” Henrietta said. “All the others were wide-area types. Very good at weeding out the weaklings and softening up the main opposition. They’re very popular on teams, which they have to be. They’re great openers, but not great closers, better against large numbers of weaker enemies.”

“That’s the opposite of you,” Humphrey said to Jason.

“I can see the appeal.” Jason said. “Just blanketing an area in afflictions would be nice. I was really envious when Beth Cavendish showed off powers like that and I was hoping to pick some up myself. I have to work to get people afflicted, and a lot of the time its better just to stab them in the neck and move on.”

“You need to get out of that habit,” Henrietta said. “The higher rank you get to, the less stabbing someone with a weapon becomes viable. A silver-ranker will pull your knife out of her throat and stab you right back with it. If you don’t have strength like Humphrey or passively add damage to your attacks like Sophie, ordinary attacks will be worthless. People get far too tough at higher rank and monsters are even worse. If you stab someone and want it to accomplish anything, there has to be a special attack to go with it.”

“Loading enemies up with afflictions at this rank feels pointless a lot of the time,” Jason said. “It doesn’t seem worth the effort when one good knife strike will get the job done.”

“That’s the wrong attitude,” Humphrey said. “The habits we ingrain now are the habits that define us in the future. You need to fight now the way you will then.”

“That makes sense,” Jason said. “I need to use those abilities to rank them up anyway.”

“Maybe ranking your affliction powers will give you some area effects,” Humphrey said to Jason.

“Not that I could find, when Clive and I looked through the Magic Society records,” Jason said. “It turns out my shadow teleport opens up portals, starting at bronze-rank, though. My range will be much shorter than Hester’s, and it won’t be able to transport people higher than bronze rank, but it’s still awesome.”

“My teleport will be long-range and let me take people with me at bronze,” Humphrey said.

“My personal space power, rune gate, also creates a portal at bronze,” Clive added.

“Hold on,” Henrietta said. “I knew about Humphrey’s power, but your team will have three portal users?”

“Mine’s technically not a portal,” Humphrey said.

“That doesn’t matter,” Henrietta said. “I thought it was bad enough when four of you had personal storage powers, but three portals? And you, Clive, getting both in the same power? Most teams would kill to get a portal user on their team.”

“Don’t tell Emir,” Jason said. “He’s already trying to poach Clive as it is.”

“You’re in demand,” Belinda said to Clive. “You should negotiate for a bigger cut of the loot.”

“The question,” Clive said, “was whether Jason’s powers would gain some wide-area effects. There are a lot of gaps in the Society’s knowledge regarding Jason’s abilities. His familiars are unusual, of course, but that’s true of many adventurers. He’s not the only adventurer to have an apocalypse beast familiar.”

“He’s not?” Humphrey asked.

“No,” Clive said. “There’s an active adventurer with another swarm-type apocalypse beast. Desolation locusts, they’re called. It’s not Jason’s familiar powers I’m thinking about, though. Many focused affliction specialists find their abilities adding wide-area aspects somewhere around the silver-gold level. Out of Jason’s sin and doom essence powers, the Society only has records of what one of them does beyond bronze rank. I’m looking forward to filling those gaps as he ranks up.”

“The sin essence is extremely rare,” Jason said, “and apparently not popular, for a legendary essence.”

“It does take a particular kind of arrogance to absorb the essence of defying the gods into your soul,” Neil said.

“I don’t see it that way,” Jason said. “The sin essence isn’t about defying gods.”

“Then what is it about?” Neil asked. “Because it really seems like it is.”

“It’s about the nature of sin,” Jason said. “A sin is a transgression against a set of rules.”

“Exactly,” Neil said. “Rules set down by the gods.”

“But those rules are arbitrary,” Jason said. “Each god had their own set of sins. For Knowledge, lying is a sin, but for Deception, or even the Merchant, lying is a part of their core practices. Each god has their own set of rules.”

“So?” Neil asked.

“So, I don’t think the sin essence is about violating rules of the gods. Not for me, at least. Maybe it works that way for some others.”

“It definitely does,” Clive said. “I’ve seen some of the combinations in the Magic Society records.”

“Anyway,” Jason said, “it doesn’t work like that for me. My sin essence, I’m pretty sure, is about having my own rules that others transgress.”

“Oh, so you’re not violating the rules of the gods,” Neil said. “You’re positioning yourself alongside them. Let me retract what I said about your breathtaking arrogance.”

The trickiest part of the adventure board notices in coastal villages was the preponderance of ocean monsters. Clive’s air bubble ritual was fine for slow underwater travel, but wouldn’t hold up to combat. Knowing their route through the coastal villages would cause this issue, they had picked up a supply of water-breathing potions from Jory before they left.

They were saving the potions for when they needed the whole team. They resolved most of the notices by relying on Jason’s magic umbrella, while his necklace of the deep was handed over to Humphrey.

Item: [Necklace of the Deep] (iron rank, uncommon)

A necklace containing the power of the deep ocean giants (jewellery, necklace).

- Effect: Ignore the effects of high pressure and pressure variance.
- Effect: Breathe water.
- Effect: Your weight is increased. You cannot use iron-rank weight reduction abilities or items.

Jason’s bubble, and the magic umbrella that created it, were quite stable and handled underwater contact with no issues. As the umbrella floated over his head by itself, it left both of his hands free, while the bubble of air meant his movements weren’t slowed down by water resistance. The biggest impediment to his combat power was the inability to pull out Colin, who couldn’t handle the salty water. The intangible Shade and Gordon handled it just fine, however.

The necklace didn’t have the same effect of freeing up movement, but it offered the secure footing of extra weight and Humphrey’s superhuman strength did the rest.

The pair emerged from the ocean after taking out a crab monster that was impacting the village’s seabed trawling operations. The water quintessence that formed along the coast north and south of the delta was the bulk of a village’s earnings. Their teammates were waiting for him on the shore.

“You should try going without your umbrella,” Clive suggested. “Getting past the drowning reflex is a good way to break the breathing habit.”

“He’s only iron rank,” Henrietta said. “He’ll drown.”

“He’s an outworlder,” Clive said. “His body got a head start on the magic transition.”

“I take it you’ve all had the talk, then,” Henrietta said.

“The talk?” Jason asked.

“The ‘we’re all turning into wet, magic flesh sacks,’ talk.”

“Yeah, we had that one,” Jason said. “Next we’re going to tell Neil where babies come from.”

The biggest time sink during their journey was not going to be travel, with the heavy skimmer Clive secured careening them over the desert in speed and relative comfort. It was the time it took to hunt down the monsters on the adventure board notices that soaked up their time. If the monsters had been closer and more of a threat to the village then they would have sent for immediate adventurer response.

The first village was the one closest to the city and in least need of extra attention. It was the remote villages out in the desert where they anticipated the notices to be stacked up. The second of three villages they planned to visit that day was the one where Jason had fought the tidal ogre.

Having been completely rebuilt, he didn’t recognise it as they arrived to the warm welcome of the villagers. After they had been forced to escape their ravaged homes, the Adventure Society had avenged their fallen, reclaimed their village and even helped fund reconstruction. They insisted on showing their gratitude with a small luncheon feast before the adventurers even had a chance to look at the adventure notice board.

They finally turned to the task that brought them to the village. It was a bronze-rank monster, but not an aggressive one. After the tidal troll, simply avoiding the territory the beast had claimed was an easy task for the villagers. This was especially true since it’s territory was a desolate stretch of desert with little value to anyone. They had simply posted warnings on the coastal road warning traders to detour around, a common enough thing in a world where monsters were a fact of life.

“This will be the first bronze-rank monster that many of you have faced,” Henrietta told the team. “The villagers have identified it as a stone lurker, which is a common monster in this area, so it should be reliable. It’s tough, strong and camouflages itself well in rocky desert areas. If you catch it in the sand it will be easy to spot, but keep a sharp eye out if you start seeing rocks. It’s very good at hiding it’s aura.”

“Also, don’t assume there is only one,” Humphrey added. “Jason, you’ll be the primary damage dealer.”

“You should be wary, Jason,” Clive said. “A stone lurker isn’t as strong as a tidal troll but it isn’t as slow, either. It can also make charging dashes, which it will in an ambush.”

There turned out to be two of the stone lurkers but the fight went well as they could have hoped. Sophie, with her enhanced aura senses, detected them right before they attacked. She and Humphrey intercepted them, her holding off one as Jason went to work on it. They already had Humphrey and Neil’s summons out, which they directed to support Humphrey.

The stone lurkers were large, bipedal lizards that hammered out with huge, knuckled fists. Their strength was enough that meeting them fist to fist rattled Sophie’s arm in spite of her attack-negating power, but she mostly dodged the attacks, frustrating the giant lizard. It was surprisingly fast for it’s size, but that was nothing to Sophie.

Humphrey didn’t have Sophie’s defensive strength so the rest of the team supported him. Clive and Belinda opened up, chaining Clive’s powerful attack spell. Humphrey held the line as Neil’s shields protected him, one after another, then let the summons take the brunt until Neil’s abilities became available again.

Jason used the reach of his shadow arm to get his attacks in from safety. Many of his afflictions were resisted at first, although his resistance-diminishing aura was stronger than in the past and almost half of them got through. Gordon’s unrelenting beam and Jason’s conjured dagger both inflicted the vulnerable condition, lowering the lizard’s resistances for each instance that took hold, so it was not long before Jason had his full suite of afflictions on the lizard. He could have unleashed Colin, but kept the leeches in reserve, in case there was a third monster, waiting to pounce.

Once his afflictions were locked in, Jason used his punishment spell. It inflicted damage for each affliction of certain types on the target, which were rapidly stacking up, but the bronze-rank monster was able to sustain that much from Jason’s iron-rank spell. He couldn’t use it again for half a minute, so he moved on to the second monster while Sophie continued to keep the first one busy.

Jason added his efforts to the others. His afflictions were soon locked in and the fight became a matter of time. He used his punishment spell every time it became available, causing more and more of the monster’s flesh to die as the afflictions mounted. In the end, he finished the monsters, one after the other, with his transcendent damage execute power.

The team were tired, stamina exhausted and mana spent. Against bronze-rank monsters, even when the fight went their way at every stage, the battle was a slog. Clive and Belinda had learned that endurance was the key when their combined efforts, while hurting the monster, weren't enough to take it down before they were reduced to ineffectually firing wands from the back.

"You did adequately," Henrietta told them in the aftermath. "Don't think things will always go that well, though. There will be hard fights ahead and you will be challenged. When I step in to save you, chances are you will have been hurt already. Badly hurt. You all need to be ready for that."

The team returned to the village to notify them they could remove the detour signs from the coast road. The team then moved on quickly as the graciousness of the villagers was appreciated, but also time-consuming.

Riding away, Sophie looked back at the village, then locked a thoughtful gaze on Asano's back.

"What is it?" Belinda asked quietly.

"He didn't tell them," Sophie said.

"Didn't tell who what?"

"Asano," Sophie said. "They don't know he's the one who killed the monster that destroyed their village, and he didn't tell them."

Chapter 198

Trash Bonanza

Jason set up the cloud house after they cleared out the adventure notices of the third village of the day. Henrietta gathered the team together to talk about their performance in the day's combat.

"Obviously, most of those notices weren't any kind of a challenge," she said. "As a team, and even alone for most of you, very few iron-rank enemies will pose any kind of threat. That's acceptable for now, but a full team of capable iron-rankers should comfortably handle not just most iron-rank monsters but bronze-rank monsters as well. One to one, any adventurer should be worth more than any monster of their own rank. That is not to say you all need to be able to handle monsters alone. Neil and Clive, your powers are obvious suited to a group environment. You need to make sure that your value to the team is greater than any monster to their pack."

Neil threw a wary glance in Jason's direction.

"What?" Jason asked.

"Nothing smarmy to say about my value to the team?"

"Are you kidding?" Jason asked. "You're awesome. If the team gets stuck in a situation where you or me has to be kicked off the bus, it's not going to be you."

"Jason is right," Henrietta said. "Neil, you are the most indispensable member of the team. That does not mean you don't have improvements to make, which goes for all of you. You beat the bronze-rank monsters today, but if you're still performing at that level by the time we get to back to Greenstone, then I will personally see to it you disband. I will not have my brother in a stagnant team, because right now you're all potential and no payoff."

She panned her gaze over the group.

"You have clearly been strategising around versatility," she went on, "which is a good fit for your team makeup and power sets. Now I've seen you in action against a live enemy who poses an actual challenge, I could easily recognise the factor holding you back. That factor is a lack of dynamism."

"We're using a variety of strategies," Humphrey said, "and we're constantly devising more."

"And that is a good foundation," Henrietta said. "You're combining your abilities well enough, but only when you fall into those devised strategies. When pushed out of them, you fall back to individual efforts. You need to internalise those strategies to the point that you can improvise on the move and adapt to the different configurations required in the

moment. The key is that when you adapt, you have to include your team members instead of falling back on what you know works just for you.”

“Trust,” Jason said.

“Precisely,” Henrietta said. “To make the most of your versatility, Improvisation will be critical. You have to know what your team is capable of and trust them to do it. You have to learn to read each other. No discussion, no hesitation. Assess, adapt, act.”

“Surely that’s a matter of experience,” Neil said.

“It’s exactly a matter of experience,” Henrietta said. “Not just any experience, though. You have to know everything your team is capable of and you won’t figure that out if you keep falling into the same, easy patterns. From now onward, I will be picking you out for notices in different groupings. When you’ve been doing this yourselves, you’ve been going for the obvious, complimentary groupings. Jason and Sophie, Clive and Belinda, Humphrey and Neil. You’re going to find these new groups I put you in awkward, perhaps even dangerous. Your job will be to tease out everything your team mates are capable of. To find the synergies you never saw and exercise the abilities that have gone neglected. If nothing else, it will help you rank up all your powers on the way to bronze.”

Henrietta put her designs into action with the next village they came to. First up was the pairing of Jason and Belinda. Belinda had fallen into a pattern of resetting and duplicating Clive’s infrequent, high-impact powers, a tactic worthless with Jason’s rapid, low-impact abilities. They ended up with Belinda serving as a makeshift guardian, drawing enemy attention while Jason went to work.

“Pathetic,” was Henrietta’s assessment. “Jason, you’re squandering Belinda’s powers and trying to do it all yourself. Expect to be placed in this pairing again and again until you find the synergies that make you fight like a team instead of like nervous adolescents, fumbling around one another.”

“I think that means you, Humphrey,” Jason said.

“Is there something in my tone that suggests inviting light-hearted whimsy?” Henrietta snapped. “If you have time to levy your wit against my brother, Mr Asano, I suggest you leverage it in the development of your combat skills, rather than your socials ones.”

Humphrey received a similar dressing down after being paired with Clive, Henrietta berating them for working as a pair of disconnected individuals.

“It’s not enough to be a distraction for your damage dealer,” Henrietta told her brother. “You’re trying to set up Clive to use his attack spell, as if he didn’t have nineteen other essence abilities. I want to see you luring people into his trap spell. Baiting the

enemy into making big attacks where his retribution damage powers will have the greatest effect. And you, Clive need to stop waiting for everyone else to give you your chances. You have to make them yourself.”

As they went from village to village, fight to fight, the team was placed in a variety of configurations. Neil was grouped with Jason, whose usual stealth tactics would leave the healer alone and exposed. Then he was paired with Sophie against a high-defence monster. Neil and Sophie made for a combination even harder to harm than the monster itself, but they lacked the offensive power to hurt it in turn, turning the fight into a battle of attrition.

Belinda saw the most action of anyone in the team, combined with everyone else in different configurations of two or three. Not only were her powers the most varied and untested, she was also the one most in need of experience.

The next bronze-rank monster encounter came at the final coastal village before their route would take them inland. Henrietta’s intention had been to let them face bronze-rank monsters in smaller groups, but this one was an aquatic monster. Not only was she allowing the full group to act together but also participating herself.

The monster wasn’t notoriously strong, but it was aquatic and had the environmental advantage. They used water breathing potions, Jason finally taking Clive’s advice and getting Humphrey to hold his head under water until he gasped out and broke the reflex to breathe. It took multiple attempts before Jason could actively stop breathing without his instincts freaking out and starting him up again. Only after finally overcoming the drowning reflex did he manage it.

“This feels very weird,” he croaked in a gasping voice. “I have to get used to talking when I’m not breathing.”

“No rush,” Neil said.

“It’s kind of unnerving,” Jason continued. “It’s like my body senses something is wrong. It definitely doesn’t want me wasting breath I don’t have on talking.”

“Trust your instincts,” Neil said.

“That’s not helping,” Henrietta said to Neil.

“It’s helping me,” Neil said.

“It will take time before your body adapts,” Clive said. “It’s actually an unusual and fascinating process. Your body, as it stops doing things the way a mortal body does, will start find new ways. Your voice, for example, won’t come from breathing through your throat but by using vibrations to generate sound. It’ll take a while before you sound like

your old self, but along the way you'll find yourself picking up interesting tricks. Throwing your voice or projecting it to fill up a room. Or just blasting louder than you ever could with something as maudlin as lungs."

"Don't try and rely on not breathing in combat, yet," Henrietta told Jason. "You've been breathing your whole life and you don't just kick the habit that easily. You can do it fine, standing around, nice and safe. You go underwater and get caught up in a fight and you'll find that drowning reflex coming right back."

The fight against the aquatic monster was a mess. While breathing water, spells could still be cast but it had to be done with careful enunciation of the incantations, slowing the process down. The leverage required to swing weapons underwater was impossible to achieve without an item like the necklace of the deep that Humphrey was wearing, and even then it took all his strength to swing his sword through the water to even minimal effect. Mobility was obviously impacted underwater and team coordination fell apart, even using Jason's voice chat for silent, telepathic speech.

"That was an absolute shambles," Henrietta told them as they dragged themselves out of the surf after eking out a victory. She had done much of the work, using a spell that allowed her familiars to act freely under the water.

"Neil, you were the solitary stand-out," she continued. "The way you covered the team and their many, many mistakes was a credit to you. Well done. How much mana do you have left?"

"I'm drained," he said, collapsing onto his back on the sandy beach.

"And that's how close you were to failure," Henrietta told the others. "If the fight had gone on any longer, there was a danger of some of you suffering real damage when Neil's mana ran out."

"The fight was in an extreme environment against a bronze-rank monster," Humphrey said in defence of the team. "If you expected us to do well, you wouldn't have participated yourself."

"And if I wasn't here to participate?" Henrietta challenged her brother. "What would you have done?"

"Sent for someone else," Humphrey said. "If it was aggressive enough to leave the water to attack, we could have fought it on land. If not, we'd have had the time to send for an adventurer better suited to fighting it."

Henrietta grinned, surprising the team.

“Good answer,” she said. “Recognising when not to fight is also a strength worth cultivating. If the top reason adventurers die is bad information, the second is lacking the courage to admit they aren’t a match for the fight in front of them.”

“Not to dismiss the fact that I was the best,” Neil said from where he was sprawled in the sand, “but how useful is learning to fight underwater anyway?”

“We won’t always get to pick our fights, or the chance to walk away,” Jason said. “We have to be ready for the fights we don’t want. That fight showed us the strength of having the right items to compensate for environmental challenges. If we pick some more up and keep them in storage, then with some more experience we should at least be able to hold our own.”

“Asano is right,” Henrietta said. “Always be as ready as you can. We’re done with these coastal villages, but once you’re back in Greenstone, pick up some items and practise more underwater combat in the mirage chamber.”

As the team turned their path inland, they started crossing the empty desert sands. The heavy skimmer allowed them to travel in relative comfort, sitting under an awning as the seemingly endless desert passed by. The air was hot, rushing over their faces with the speed of the skimmer, but not oppressively so with milder winter temperatures.

Jason and Clive both had oasis bracelets that shielded them from the heat, as did Belinda. Jory had gifted it to her in preparation for her first real adventuring expedition. For the rest of the team he had provided less-valuable, but still welcome heat protection for a nominal fee. Sophie, Neil and Humphrey all wore head-cloths that were alchemically treated to remain wet and cool. Henrietta had a fire essence and could eat worse heat than the desert could throw at her.

They made their way through remote villages that were torn between gratitude for their arrival and frustration it had taken so long. The villages were all located on oases sourced from apertures to the rainforest astral space. One village had even experienced attacks by Builder cultists who had fled through the local aperture, following the battle with the expedition in the astral space.

The villages in the sandy regions of the desert were largely there to serve the more remote spirit coin farms. With many magical practises prohibited in the area of the sensitive coin farms, the people staffed there turned to nearby villages.

Moving deeper in, the sand turned to rocky wastes. Most of the villagers they encountered quarried the stone for which Greenstone was named, while others were mining towns. Most of those towns were built around dig sites for a magical ore that

appeared in the desert, and while investigating to serve his own curiosity, Jason made an interesting discovery.

The magical mineral sun gold could be found in iron and bronze-rank veins and mostly appeared in arid lands that saw clear skies all year round. For that reason, most sun gold mines were located in deserts. Sun gold was always found with large quantities of what they called trash gold, which was normal rank and had no magical properties. It simply formed in large quantities around sun gold veins and had to be carefully separated from the valuable stuff in the smelting process.

Jason picked some of the discarded metal.

Item: [Gold Nugget] (normal rank, common)

A lump of non magical gold. Has little value in worlds with magical equivalents (crafting material, metal).

➤ Effect: Non-magical crafting material.

The sun gold was refined by a local whose iron and transmutation essences turned him into a human smelting machine. Trash gold was a cheap cosmetic material considered too heavy to be worth shipping off and was largely discarded. Jason paid the smelter to go through the slag piles, helping him experiment with what sizes he could fit into his inventory. It turned out he could stack twenty ten-kilogram bars of purified trash gold into a single slot, as the restrictions were more size than weight-based. Jason left the village with two slots filled with heavy gold bars.

“What do you want all that trash gold for?”

“Someday I’m going to go home,” Jason said. “Where I come from, there’s no such thing as magic gold. In my world, trash gold is just gold.”

Chapter 199

Strangeness

As they went from town to town, clearing off huge stacks of adventure notices, not everything went as planned. Henrietta continued breaking the team into inefficient combinations, which was only the start of things going wrong.

Humphrey had been regularly summoning his dragon tooth warriors, both to practise working with them and level the power. Each time he did, he used the summoner's die to alter their form. The die had proven an effective boost, turning his warriors into hulking gorillas, swift hunting cats or even giant, blood-draining spiders.

The way the die worked was to roll it in the summoning circle, which for Humphrey was a simple circle of powdered chalk. This served to activate the power, calling out the summons in their altered form. Three giant fish made of ivory appeared on the ground, wrapped in chain mail and flopping around like fish on a dock.

"What is this?" Humphrey asked.

"Looks like one of the sides on that die is fish," Jason said, giving Humphrey a consoling pat on the back.

"I can't resummon them for six hours."

"Tough luck buddy," Jason said. "I guess you're fighting this monster without them, unless you can find a lake real quick."

Amongst the iron-rank monsters they were clearing out like they were magical exterminators, they came across the occasional additional notice for a bronze-rank monster. This was where the team faced challenges that truly tested their abilities.

Henrietta assigned Neil, Clive and Belinda to hunt down a monster called a sand hulk, a lesser giant that was common in desert areas. Without Sophie, Humphrey or even Jason to obstruct or distract, the team had little in the way of front-line options against the slow but powerful monster.

Belinda's counterfeit combatant power was at the bottom of iron rank, nowhere close to the point that they would risk her attempting to hold it off. That left Neil's summon, the chrysalis golem, which only took one punch each from the monster's huge fists before retreating into its harmless chrysalis state. It could no longer fight in that state, but not even the giant, twice as tall as person was able to damage it. The giant wasted precious moments that the team used to retreat as it pummelled ineffectually at the crystal cocoon.

The team fought a stalling retreat, blasting away at the monster with wands and spells. Clive's familiar, Onslow, proved a relatively effective source of attacks. Any time Clive wasn't casting his own spells, he was continually recharging the tortoise's elemental powers. The only issue was the tortoise was even slower than the giant, so Clive had to periodically return Onslow to the rune in his skin, then move back before pulling the familiar out again.

Belinda's lantern familiar also sent bolts of force in the sand hulk but was much less effective. The disruptive-force attacks were better against magic in incorporeal entities, rather than a solid, physical monster.

They threw power after power at the sand hulk, which largely shrugged it off. It walked right over Clive and Belinda's rune traps. Belinda's lightning tether dealt damage the further the target moved from it, but even at maximum ranged its damage was superficial. Clive's big attack spell, looped and copied by Belinda, was the only thing that inflicted any real damage.

Belinda glanced at Clive, who nodded and she used her pit of the reaper ability. It opened up a dimensional pit, not an actual hole in the ground but an extra-dimensional one that didn't occupy space and was open to normal space at the top. The walls were frictionless and anything inside would suffer ongoing necrotic damage.

The team's concern was that they had looked up the sand hulk and knew it could transform into a cloud of sand. There was little information about the sand cloud form and Clive was wary of it. They didn't know if it could fly or use some kind of scouring sandstorm attack they couldn't defend against. They had held off using the pit as they were concerned about it triggering the power but they needed all the time they could get to burn the monster down. If it couldn't escape the hole and they could shoot down at it like fish in a barrel, then all the better.

The sluggish monster was not hard to drop into the pit, but their first concern was proven valid as it flew right back out in the form of a sand dervish. It moved no faster than the monster's previous pace, however, and retook the form of a giant.

In the time the pit had delayed it, Neil's golem had the chance to catch up. It had hatched from its cocoon some time ago, but was not much faster than the giant. The golem's new form was something between crystalline and gelatinous. It wrapped a pair of long, rubbery appendages around the monster, which immediately began to retaliate.

The monster ripped off the gooey appendages but the golem simply grew more from its fluid body mass. The monster pounded on the golem's body, which rippled like a jellied dessert as it absorbed the impact. The monster tried transforming into sand to escape the

grip, only to find that as its body started changing into sand, that sand became stuck to the golem. The monster halted the transformation and went back to trying to free itself through main force.

With the giant at a standstill, the team intensified their attacks, throwing everything they had at it. Neil's summon had performed its function of adapting to the needs of the fight admirably, but it was ultimately an iron-rank monster fighting a bronze-rank one. It couldn't harm the sand hulk, merely tie it up for a brief but valuable few moments. Eventually the sand hulk tore its way free by ripping the golem into globulous chunks and tossing them aside. Once the golem fell inert, the giant turned back to the team.

Despite its incredible resilience, the monster was in a bad state, by this point. The sheer accumulation of damage had left it pitted and burned, spilling out sand like it was blood. Neil and Clive had both taken the chance to use powerful retribution effects on the golem, which had turned the damage from the sand hulk's own powerful blows back on itself. Clive's spell had continued to have a large impact and the simple accumulation of damage from rune traps, wands, Onslow's elemental attacks and other abilities had simply piled up.

When it was clear the monster would break free of the golem, Belinda and Clive had set up a whole line of rune traps and the monster waded over them, one after another. This was enough to finally make the sand hulk decide to flee, which it tried to do in the form of a slow-moving sand cloud. Clive used his big attack spell, wrath of the magister, one more time. He used the most powerful version, a prismatic beam launching into the cloud. The colours dimmed, one by one, until the beam was black and a void sphere appeared in the middle of the cloud. The sand was sucked through as if the void sphere was a hole in the universe, the once seemingly indestructible monster annihilated into nothingness.

The weary group trudged back to the rest of the team. They looked to Henrietta for her assessment, although it was Jason who spoke first.

"I don't think there's anything to loot," he said. "Neil?"

"I was too far away," Neil said. "It wasn't in range of my aura."

"Maybe there are some scraps left behind from where they attacked it along the way," Jason suggested.

"Loot can wait," Henrietta said and gave the tired combatants an assessing look. "I took away the toughest and most mobile members of your team and you still got the job done. This was an acceptable performance. If we get another sand hulk it's yours to fight, Asano."

“Won’t that be an easy one for me?” Jason asked. “A big, slow monster like that?”

“The Magic Society entry doesn’t say if that cloud form clears off afflictions,” Henrietta said. “I’m willing to bet it does. I’m curious as to what you’ll do about that.”

Late in the evening, Jason stepped outside the cloud house. They were out in the desert, in between villages, and it had once again taken the form of a set of flat stone buildings.

Jason concentrated and stairs appeared on the side of one of the buildings. It might look and feel like stone, but still moulded itself as the cloud-stuff it truly was. Jason was becoming more and more adept at controlling it. He walked up the stairs to the roof where, to his surprise, he found Clive’s familiar, Onslow, standing in the middle of the roof.

“How did you get up here?”

Onslow responded only with a slow yawn.

“Keep it casual, don’t reveal all your cards,” Jason said. “I can respect that. Mind if I join you?”

The closest Onslow came to a response was an impassive blink.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

A patch of roof rose up to form a chair of clouds and Jason sat down. He concentrated on bringing his breathing to a halt. Henrietta had been on the mark about needing time to adjust to not breathing and he had been practising of a night, wearing his warmest clothes in the chilly desert night.

Neither moon was in the sky but he had no trouble seeing out over the barren landscape. His midnight eyes power was edging achingly close to becoming his first bronze-rank ability and his vision in the dark was near absolute. Originally, the power had let him see with washed-out colour. Now he could see as clear as day, yet he could also see the darkness almost like a physical substance, oddly transposed over his vision. It should have clashed, yet seemed to him part of a natural whole, even though the result looked something like an alien landscape. It was nothing that his old human eyes could ever perceive.

Midnight eyes had been his very first essence ability. Compared to the other things he could do it was positively mundane, yet it was also the most emblematic of everything he had been through. Because of that power, the way he looked at the world had literally changed. It was the still moments, alone in the dark, when Jason most felt the strangeness of his new world. More than that, the strangeness of what he had become living in it.

He practised speaking without breathing, using exercises Henrietta had taught him. Onslow was watching him and Jason retrieved Colin, who piled up in front of the tortoise. Onslow tilted his head to look at the pile as Team Colin undulated excitedly in front of it.

Eventually Jason tired of practise and decided to get some rest, collecting Colin and making his way back down the stairs. There, he had an odd encounter as two people emerged at the same time from different buildings. They were both also Jason.

The three Jason's looked at each other. One had an embarrassed look on his face, the other, a bushy moustache.

"I take it Clive is still trying to have you replicate my interface ability?"

"Yeah," Belinda/Jason said with an apologetic smile.

"Biscuits!"

Jason tousled Stash/Jason's hair. "What did Humphrey say about sweet things before bed?"

"Warm milk?" Stash/Jason ventured.

"That, I think we can manage," Jason said.

"Yay!" Stash/Jason cheered. "Why is everyone better looking than me?"

"That's enough out of you, dragon."

Chapter 200

Full Circle

The six-legged lizards were not especially dangerous individually. They were no bigger than medium-sized dogs and posed little threat. What made them troublesome was that they were extraordinary in both their hardiness and their number. A group of lizards was normally called a lounge, but the mass of creatures the team was viewing from a distance would be better described as a swarm or even a carpet.

“Desert horde lizards,” Henrietta said. “They’re not a real danger to an adventurer, but they’re a lot harder to kill than they look. Most of the time they’ll just lay about in the desert sun, not bothering anyone. If they’re on the move, though, they’re looking to feast. They can come down on a town like a swarm of giant locusts. Regular people have no chance of putting them down.”

She turned to the team, looking down at the monsters from a high ridge. “Any volunteers?”

“Let Belinda and I go,” Jason said.

Henrietta raised her eyebrows. She had paired Jason and Belinda together the most because the combination had shown the least results. While their effectiveness had improved, that improvement had come from combining individual effort instead of operating as a unit.

“You have something to show me?” Henrietta asked.

“We’ve been working on some things,” Belinda said. “This should be a good enemy to show off the results.”

Henrietta acceded and Jason and Belinda made their way down the sharp ridge. The lizards were following the base of the ridge around, so by going down one side, they had time to make preparations before the lizards arrived. They called out their familiars, except for Colin, and Jason pulled out a large flat board, setting it on the ground. Belinda took out a stick of chalk and started drawing out a ritual circle.

Clive was the team's master of ritual magic, with a breadth of knowledge that regularly staggered Jason, who was learning from Clive. Belinda was likewise learning from Clive, but for her, it was more like filling in gaps. When it came to a certain branch of magic, the deception and intrusion branch, even Clive had something to learn from her. The circle she was drawing out wouldn't visibly disguise them, but it would contain any aura they inadvertently revealed while using essence abilities.

Desert horde lizards were short-sighted, relying more on aura senses than normal sensation to sense prey or other predators. So long as the lizards had something else to hold their attention, Jason and Belinda should be able to cast spells from a distance without being detected.

They sent their familiars forward to meet the monsters as they came around the ridge. Remaining behind were Colin, still in Jason's blood, and one of Shade's three bodies, currently serving as Jason's shadow.

The lizards became a boiling cauldron of chaos as they surged on the familiars, the aggressive monsters piling over each other to reach them. Their savage bites had little effect, with Gordon, Shade and Belinda's living illusion all being incorporeal. Belinda's flying lantern floated out of reach, blasting down bolts of force. The inherent magic in the monsters allowed them to minimally affect the familiars, but not to the point they posed a genuine threat, even in massive numbers.

The familiars, in turn, didn't make much of a dent on the lizards. Only Gordon, with his resonating-force beam, inflicted any effective damage. The goal was not to inflict damage, however, but to hold the attention of the monsters. Only once Jason and Belinda were certain the lizards were focused entirely on the familiars did they start casting spells. Jason started, chanting a spell that, from the victim's perspective, gave no indication of where the caster was. At the distance they were at, there was no chance of the lizards hearing his quiet recitation.

"Carry the mark of your transgressions."

Ability: [Castigate] (Sin)

- Spell (curse, holy).
 - Cost: Moderate mana.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 8 (19%).

 - Effect (iron): Burns a painful brand into the target, inflicting slight transcendent damage and the [Sin] and [Mark of Sin] conditions. The brand cannot be healed so long as the target retains any instances of [Sin].

 - [Sin] (affliction, curse, stacking): All necrotic damage taken is increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

 - [Mark of Sin] (affliction, holy): Prevents aura retraction. Cannot be cleansed while target retains any instances of [Sin] or [Legacy of Sin].
-

A small amount of transcendent damage burned a brand into one of the lizards and it gained two afflictions. The important one was sin, which increased any necrotic damage. There was no indication as the source of the spell and Jason's rigid aura control kept it from leaking as he used the ability. Even if it had, Belinda's ritual circle would have contained it. The unintelligent lizard became frenzied as it renewed its attention on the obvious enemies, the familiars.

Right after Jason used his spell, Belinda used the same incantation and cast the same spell on a second lizard. Her aura control wasn't as practised as Jason's, which was why the ritual was primarily for her.

Ability: [Mirror Magic] (Magic)

- **Special Ability.**
- **Cost: Varies.**
- **Cooldown: Varies.**

- **Current rank: Iron 2 (91%).**

- **Effect (iron):** For a short time after a nearby ally uses a spell, you may use the same spell one time. The strength of the spell you cast is based on your attributes and the rank of this ability and your attributes, not those of the original caster. This may make your version of the spell higher or lower rank than the original, including losing or gaining additional effects from higher ranks. This ability has the same cost and cooldown as the original spell.

In the past, Belinda had mostly used the ability to copy Clive's potent attack spell. As she and Jason had spent evenings looking for more ways to synergise their powers, they had a revelation. Jason's abilities might be less impactful, but they also had no cooldown. In circumstances where he needed to use them over and over, Belinda could double the rate of application.

Jason followed up his castigate spell with inexorable doom, to get the sin affliction multiplying. Like his first spell, it gave no indication of its source, manifesting directly on the target. This was rare in abilities with more immediate effects and most often found in single-target afflictions powers. Such abilities could ignore many physical obstructions, so long as the target was visible. It took magical protection, such as the common mana shield ability, to prevent the easy use of such a power.

Jason's familiars were his key tools in dealing with that particular problem. Colin could slither right through the shield, which didn't register movement as an attack unless it was much faster than Colin could manage. Only if spraying out of Jason would it count, so Jason would usually have to bait such enemy into Colin's range.

Shade couldn't usually get through such powers, with magic shields blocking even movement from incorporeal creatures. With the mana shield ability specifically, though, which directly manifested mana as a shield, he could drain mana directly from it. Mana shield was an extremely common power, available through many essences. Clive and Neil both possessed it as did Sigrid and Claire, the healer from Rick Geller's team. It made Shade very useful for breaking through that specific power.

For Gordon, breaking magic shields was a much more straightforward problem. His disruptive-force beam wasn't wildly powerful, but its sustained effect would break down magical shields very quickly. However the shield went down, it would give Jason a chance to get a spell in before the shield snapped back into place.

None of that was necessary against the lizards, however. Jason would cast his castigate on one lizard and follow up with inexorable doom, Belinda following up on a second. He used castigate, she used castigate. He used inexorable doom, she did the same. She could only duplicate a spell once for each time it was cast by the original user. The cost and duration of the ability were equal to the cost of the copied power.

Neither of Jason's spells had a cooldown, so they were able to paint the lizards with brands and afflictions. Both spells had a moderate mana cost, so it wasn't until they were done that their mana pools started to get low. Jason's wasn't as bad as Belinda; his recovery attribute was more than half a rank higher hers and his mana had been naturally replenishing faster. She drank a mana potion to compensate.

"Is that all of them?" Belinda asked.

"It should be most of them at least," Jason said. "You put on the big show and I'll mop up after. Call them back, Shade."

Jason's shadow was one of Shade's three bodies, while the others were helping hold the lizard's attention. One of the tricks Belinda and Jason had developed was to use Shade to direct their familiars allowing them to work at a distance effectively. Belinda's familiars didn't hesitate to come back, then when Shade relayed the call to return.

Most of the lizards had suffered brands put in place with unstoppable transcendent damage, far from crippling but painful. It had sent them into a frenzy in their pursuit of the familiars, which they immediately chased as the familiars started to fall back toward Belinda and Jason.

The lizards were collected nicely in their pursuit, so when a crystal rod appeared in their midst, they were all within range of its effect.

Ability: [Force Tether] (Trap)

- Conjunction.
- Cost: Low mana-per-second.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 1 (34%).

- Effect (iron): Conjures a crystal rod, from which a tether of shimmering force connects to all nearby enemies within a moderate range. Tethered enemies are dragged toward the rod, which is protected by a force field that inflicts moderate resonating force-damage to anyone in contact with it. If the force-field is ruptured, it explodes in a wave of resonating-force damage. If the rod is destroyed or removed from its location then it explodes in a wave of disruptive-force damage. Dimensional displacement, such as teleportation, severs the tether. Untethered enemies who enter within range of the rod become tethered. Only one rod may exist at a time.

The force tether was a powerful control effect against groups of weaker enemies. Stronger enemies, or someone like Humphrey, could resist the pull of the rod with physical might. The lizards, however, were nowhere near as strong as they were tough. The tether quickly dragged them into a pile, burying the rod and its small force field underneath them. Belinda then used another conjuration power.

Ability: [Pit of the Reaper] (Trap)

- Conjunction (dimension).
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 2 minutes.

- Current rank: Iron 1 (14%).

- Effect (iron): Conjures a dimensional space pit on any horizontal surface. The surface does not need to be solid or supportive. Anyone inside the pit suffers ongoing necrotic damage. If this spell is cast again while a pit already exists, the existing pit vanishes, depositing anyone inside upon the surface on which the pit was conjured.

A hole in the ground appeared under the pile of lizards and they fell in. A few lizards around the periphery remained outside of the pit from the sheer size of the monster pile managed to scramble out of the pit's area in time, but the crystal rod that was the source of the force tether in the air also fell down, dragging them over the edge and into the pit with the others. Being moved from its original location triggered the rod and its force field to explode, the twin waves of force smashing lizards into the frictionless walls of the pit.

Soon, the shrieking cries of the lizards came rising up from the pit. The pit's necrotic damage was not a large amount but most of the lizards were stacked high with the sin affliction that multiplied it. The screams started to diminish as the lizards died, until the duration of the pit ended after just over a minute.

The only lizards that survived were the ones who hadn't been branded because Jason and Belinda missed them in the original sprawling group. Those surviving lizards started moving in the direction of Belinda, Jason and the returned familiars.

"Gordon, intercept any that move on Belinda. Shade, one on me, one on Lindy and one with Gordon."

Jason broke into a sprint in the direction of the lizards. The familiars were quickly following. Jason leapt into the air, combining the power of his cloak and his magical boots to go sailing over the monsters.

Item: [Sand-Cutter Boots] (iron rank, rare)

Boots incorporating the chitin of a sand-cutter, inheriting some of its power (apparel, boots).

- Effect: Improved ability to walk on sand.
- Effect: Increased jump height and distance.
- Effect: Enhanced kick attack. Highly effective against enemies with strong earth affinity.

He cut his hand as he passed over, raining Colin down over the monsters before he landed lightly on the other side. The now frenetic lizards wheeled around to go after him, even as Team Colin dug into them. Jason didn't bother trying to finish them himself, instead dancing around, playing distraction the way the familiars had before. Gordon and Belinda's lantern from the other side started beaming them, splitting their attention.

Any time a lizard got too close, Jason swung a kick in front of it. A chain-whip of razor shards came out his boot with every kick, causing the lizards to flinch at the surprisingly deep lacerations it gouged out of them. Like many desert monsters, they had a strong earth affinity, making them vulnerable to the attacks of Jason's boots.

Lack of intelligence was the biggest weakness that low-rank monsters possessed, Jason and his familiars playing them back and forth as Colin did his work. Jason could easily teleport between Shades, one remaining on the far side of the monsters, one with Belinda and one in between, with Gordon. Soon enough, the surviving stragglers were finished, Jason using his execute on some of them to help level the power.

After the fight was done, the pair made their way back up the ridge. Belinda was exhausted, dripping with sweat despite the refreshing power of her magical bracelet. Jason had replenished himself on the bodies of the fallen monsters with his blood harvest spell, so was back to full strength.

“That was excellent,” Henrietta told them. “Belinda, you're only just beginning to realise the potential in your powers. You'll be able to handle monsters of your own rank well enough, but once you have full command of your abilities, working alone would be an egregious waste. You need to be the mortar in a brick wall. You can make an adequate wall with just bricks, but the mortar makes it so much better than it ever could be without it.”

She turned to Jason.

“You are something on an opposite,” she told him. “You're strong on your own and you're harder to mesh with others without taking away some of your greatest strengths. Because of that, you need to develop different skill sets for when you're operating in a team to working alone. To truly be part of the team you have to use them as more than just a distraction while you have your own fight. I have no doubt you could have conducted some version of what you did here by yourself, but by integrating your abilities you developed a reliable, effective and efficient strategy.”

“Thanks,” Jason said. “I was kind of waiting for the turn-around there where you start telling me what I did wrong.”

“You weren't perfect, by any means,” Henrietta said, “but you're coming along. Your rapid improvement tells me that Humphrey knew what he was doing when he put this team together. There's a lot of potential here.”

The team's route had taken them north from Greenstone, up the coast, inland over the sands of what Jason knew as the Nambi desert and into the Kalahari. There was more plant life, patchy and dry though it was, with mountains dotting the horizon. Jason had been looking to his map as they travelled, which unveiled space as he passed through it. He had been watching as their path formed a loop of revealed space, his eyes always turning back to the point the loop would close.

Because of his map ability, Jason had been playing team navigator. One of the map's functions, he discovered, was to mark waypoints, even to areas that were still veiled. He could use the waypoint to mark out a route and use the mini-map feature the map gained when it evolved to keep them on track. As navigator, Jason occupied the other front seat of the skimmer, next to Clive who was driving. When the loop had almost closed entirely,

he leaned over at Clive and talked over the sound of air rushing through the magic ring at the back of the skimmer.

“Can we take a little detour?” Jason asked. “Should only be about an hour out of our way for the skimmer.”

“What is it you want to see?” Henrietta asked from behind him.

“Some blood cultists tried to sacrifice me and my friends in this big ritual chamber, inside a mountain. I wouldn't mind taking another look, now that I'm not terrified out of my wits and I've spent more than a few hours in this world.”

“I definitely want to see that,” Humphrey said. “I've heard the story and I'd love to see where it happened.”

Henrietta looked at the others and got a general consensus of nods.

“Alright, then,” she said. “Let's go take a look.”

The entrance was a cave was easy to miss from any kind of distance, but they spotted the remnants of a magic Society expedition. Trash, debris and a couple of abandoned tents that seemed to have suffered a monster attack made for an obvious marker.

“That's the problem with these expeditions in the desert,” Clive said, examining the tents after the skimmer pulled up. “There's not a lot out here, so they tend to attract monsters.”

“When did the Magic Society come here?” Jason asked.

“Right after Rufus gave his report to the Adventure Society,” Clive said. “After hearing what happened, the Adventure Society referred it to us so we could assess the site for potential future threats.”

“Did you find any?” Neil asked. “Might be worth knowing before we go in there.”

“No,” Clive said. “Ultimately, it was just an ordinary, if impressive ritual room. If anything, the main value is historical. Like the Sky River Aqueduct or the Order of the Reaper complex we found under the swamp, the ritual room here predates the settlement of Greenstone. It seems like the Vane family simply found it and made use of it.”

They went in through the cave, down the long tunnel into the mountain. Glow stones were pulled out to light the way.

“The cult had these strange red lanterns that washed everything the colour of blood,” Jason said. “I don't know if they had some kind of purpose, or were just aesthetic.”

They emerged into the main chamber. The stairs, like carved pegs jutting out of the wall, wound their way up and around the cylindrical chamber. There were larger platforms

at cardinal points as the stairway went up. On the floor level, what used to be the pool of blood-like liquid still occupied most of the space. It was now drained, reminding Jason of an empty swimming pool in some abandoned house.

“The pit was full of this nasty liquid,” Jason told the others walking over to look inside. It was about as deep as Jason was tall, a featureless pit of dark stone. “There was a light shining out of it that washed everything red, like those lanterns I mentioned.”

“It smells like blood in here,” Sophie said.

“Not like it used to,” Jason said. “The air was thick and heavy with it, then. I was pretty woozy because I'd already been knocked out a few times that day.”

“The Magic Society team examined and disposed of the liquid,” Clive said. “It turned out to be mostly water, mixed with various alchemical materials. There was also a lot of blood in it. The team estimated at least a dozen people died to produce it. The report described the substance as reminiscent of blood that refused to dry or clot and was extremely unnerving, even with the magic within it gone dormant.”

“The Adventure Society made their own investigation,” Jason said. “I was qualified to look at the report after I reached three stars. It turns out that the Vane family had been preying on the towns in the region for years and passing it off as monster attacks.”

“I can't believe they were really eating people,” Neil said. “I knew Landemere Vane. Not well, but I saw him at social events.”

“I knew him as well,” Clive said. “We shared the same magical specialty. I thought he was a genius, seeming to pluck these incredible innovations out of the air. Now we know he was getting them from the Builder cult all along.”

Jason walked them through the events of that day, as best as he remembered them.

“This was the platform where they left me. They dropped Gary first because he was the heavy one. If you look over the edge you'll see the doorway on the other side of the room. I jumped off the edge of the platform and used my cloak to float down. All I had was that and my dark vision power. My intention had been to run like hell, and I almost did.”

“But you came back,” Humphrey said.

“To hear Gary tell it,” Jason said, “it was some brilliant scheme to lure off some of the cultists. The truth is, I really was running. But I was unconscious when I arrived and had no idea what was at the end of that tunnel. I knew I would need help if I didn't want to be recaptured ten minutes later. Also, I'd been whacked around the brain too many times. My judgement was compromised.”

They continued up the stairs.

“This is where Rufus had a sword fight, except his sword was this evil magic gardening trowel that I found at the Vane Estate. I wish I had a recording crystal of that. It was incredible.”

They went all the way to the top, the platform once holding the altar now empty. He walked up to the edge, looking down with a sigh.

“The first time I ever deliberately killed a person was in this room. Landemere Vane was the first, back at the estate, but that just kind of happened when we were struggling over a knife.”

“These people would have killed you, too,” Humphrey said. “That’s the whole reason they brought you here.”

“I know,” Jason said. “I don’t regret the way it turned out. But this is the first place I ever decided to kill a person and then did it.”

He turned back and gave Sophie a sad smile.

“You probably think I’m a spoiled fool,” he said to her. “The life you’ve had, and here I am complaining about the things you probably did far younger.”

“You’re definitely a fool,” Sophie said, giving him a wry smile. “And yes, I had to make that decision younger than you. That doesn’t make it easy, though, whenever it happens.”

“It was bandits, for me,” Humphrey said. “I’d only just gotten my essences and was still training. I was out with my cousin, Ernest, who was looking through monster notices for something I could handle. We were on a hunt and came across this trade caravan fleeing from bandits. Their leader was bronze-rank, so Ernest was tied up fighting him while I took the others. I knew my special attacks were powerful, and I’d seen what they could do in the mirage chamber, but it was different in real life. I mean, it wasn’t, but it was. It’s terrifying how easily people can die. That first bandit, when I hit her... it was like the top half of her just exploded, raining down into the mud in unrecognisable chunks. It didn’t even land on me; the power blasted it all away. I remember thinking it was odd that I stayed clean.”

“It was bandits for me too,” Clive said. “They raid the remote farms and ranches in the delta, sometimes. They didn’t know my family had an adventurer son, or that he was visiting.”

Clive’s face twisted into an uncharacteristic rage.

“They found out,” he said quietly.

They made their way back down to the bottom of the chamber and Jason pointed out scorch marks, hard to spot against the dark stone.

“This is where we fought the sanguine horror,” Jason said. “Farrah got her suppression collar off and blasted it to ash.”

“Quite a way to begin your journey as an adventurer,” Henrietta said.

“You know, I’m not sure I even knew what an adventurer was, the last time I was here,” Jason said. “Rufus, Farrah and Gary only had a chance to start answering my many, many questions on the way back to the Vane Estate. It’ll be interesting to see that place again.”

Chapter 201

Regretting it Later

Jason looked around the skimmer as it sailed smoothly over the rocky ground. It was an unremarkable patch of desert, but the walk between the mountain and its hidden sacrifice chamber and the Vane Estate had been an important time for Jason. It was his first chance to slow down and get some answers from someone who didn't want to eat him or throw him in an evil blood pit.

That was when he really met Rufus, with his solid dependability and Gary with his boisterous enthusiasm. Then there was Farrah. She was the one who made the team work, bringing Gary into line when it was time for business and loosening Rufus up when he was causing unnecessary tension. Smarter than either, she could have easily led a team of her own. She was wise enough to recognise that she didn't want to, leaving that to Rufus while she engaged in her own pursuits.

Jason hadn't realised that, at the time. He was still agape at the terrifying volcano powers she had used to annihilate the sanguine horror. He was only just getting to know the people who would be his first friends and mentors in his new world.

Returning to the place it had all started, the path he had taken weighed heavily on his mind. It was a path of violence from the very beginning, so different from the safe, prosperous life he had known. That first night he had spoken to Rufus of his fears, of what a life of violence could turn him into. Rufus had not given him the reassurance he sought.

Instead, Rufus told Jason that he would have to choose between holding onto his innocence or seizing his own destiny. He promised that a life of adventure would give Jason the world, but it would come at a price. That price was safety and the inescapable stain of bloody hands. Looking back, Rufus' promise had been kept. Jason had money, power, influence. Precious friends and boon companions. But he had also faced danger, and been the danger faced by others. It could be considered a naïveté, but he wondered if violence and killing had become too easy.

The need for violence and the moral action was a harder thing to balance than he ever thought. He was proud of his growing capability, and largely of what he had done with it. But that pride also brought danger and regret. He'd gone along with everyone else to fight the Ustei tribe on their sand barge, and while they had certainly needed to be stopped, no more than a token effort had been put towards conciliation. That he didn't know how many people he killed that day was bad enough. That it had been for someone else's reasons made it all the worse.

He thought about the men he killed in the shopping arcade. For all that he told himself it was justified, he could have easily escaped without hurting anyone. In his most honest moments, he knew he didn't kill them in self-defence or through some need to send a message. Not any message worth sending, anyway. It had been pride. They had the temerity to challenge him and he had wanted – needed – to let everyone know that to come for him was to pay the price in blood.

Thadwick Mercer was, at the core, a creature of pride. It was what made him so easy to wound and drove every mistake he made. In the Reaper trials, Jason had come face to face with his own dark future, with the place that pride would take him, if he was not mindful of it.

That he had been more successful than Thadwick made people more accepting of his pride, but that was a trap. Something that made his pride more insidious, more dangerous. He had dismissed the Adventure Society's need for him to make a humble gesture, thinking himself clever for turning it to his own purpose. He was coming to realise that he had a greater need to find some humility than he thought.

"Is that it?" Clive asked, next to him, as they crossed a rocky rise.

When Jason had first spotted the Vane Estate those months ago, it had been an incongruous stretch of green. Rufus had remarked on what a waste of resources it was to maintain a temperate springtime in the middle of the desert. From the yellows and browns that had replaced the green, that price was apparently no longer being paid.

"That's it," Jason said, double-checking his map. "It looks a bit worse for wear than the last time I was there."

"Stop the skimmer on the outside," Henrietta said, leaning forward to speak to Clive. "We don't think there'll be anyone in residence, but the Adventure Society wants us checking for a reason. Best not announce ourselves too loudly."

As they approached, they found wilting plants, withered bushes and half-barren trees, their remaining leaves the brown, red and yellow of deep autumn. The Vane Estate had been an English country garden, held in a perpetual spring. As the energy maintaining the artificial climate depleted, that spring was passing through a deep autumn on the way to a sun-scorched, desert winter.

The pillars placed along the outside edge of the estate grounds still marked the border between the desert and the estate. Clive drew the skimmer up next to one and the team disembarked and stepped across the boundary. The air inside was still cooler than the desert, but hotter than what Jason remembered. Guided by Jason's map, they set off across the yellowing grass for the inner reaches of the sprawling estate.

“That’s the hedge maze,” Jason pointed out. The towering hedge walls looked thinner than he remembered, the pale green hedges a pale reflection of its previous, lush glory. “I came into this world somewhere in the middle of that.”

“Is that what made that big hole?” Sophie asked, pointing. There was a ragged arch in the hedges, mirrored in the hedges they could see through it.

“No, that was Gary,” Jason said. “He and Farrah sent their summons right through the middle of it. He said it was to sweep out any cultists, but I think it was mostly to annoy Anisa.”

“Anisa?” Henrietta asked.

“Priestess of Purity. She was temporarily attached to Rufus’ team. The church were the ones that sent them out here, which we think was all part of their game-playing. I have to imagine an alliance between them and the Builder cult is an uneasy one.”

“It seems dangerous for the cult to involve outsiders, like that,” Belinda said. “Too much chance of exposure. Getting too impressed with the cleverness of your own plans is a sure way to mess them up.”

“The Builder cult apparently had their hearts set on this place,” Jason said. “I can see how the combination of isolation, space and comfort would appeal. The matriarch of the house didn’t like the Builders, though. Didn’t approve of her son being part of the wrong cult.”

“You seem to run into a lot of cultists,” Humphrey said.

“Oh, that’s nothing,” Jason said. “Back in my world they come to your door with pamphlets.”

He turned his gaze back to the hedge maze.

“I couldn’t tell you exactly where I appeared in there. My arrival didn’t seem to do any damage, and every place looks like every other in a maze. Which is the whole point, I guess.”

As they progressed through the estate, they saw more and more damage beyond that caused by the desert reclaiming the land. Someone had taken axe and flame to the place, breaking down outbuildings and torching gardens. When they reached the manor, it had clearly taken the brunt of whatever ire had driven the vandals. Only sections of burned and collapsed building still stood at the original height. Every section of wall intact enough to fit it had been painted with bright red graffiti, denouncing the inhabitants as blood drinkers and murderers.

“It seems word got out about the blood cult preying on the nearby towns and villages,” Humphrey said. “There isn’t much of a manor left to check out.”

“There were some fairly extensive cellars,” Jason said. “They may be intact.”

The team made their way into the gutted ruin of the manor house.

“Careful of the parts that haven’t collapsed yet,” Henrietta warned.

They quickly discovered that the floors had been burned through, dumping the charred remains of the house above into blackened piles in the expansive cellar space. Jason managed to find the entrance to the underground ritual room, but the tunnel was packed tight with debris.

“Should we dig it out?” Humphrey asked.

“No,” Henrietta said. “If we did it fast, what’s left of the house would collapse on us. If we went carefully, it would take too long and might collapse anyway.”

“There’s another entrance,” Jason said. “It’s bit of a crawl through a tight, wet tunnel. Which is at the bottom of a well. After that, though, it’s just a subterranean cave with a walkway and you’re there.”

“I don’t think we need to go that far,” Henrietta said.

“Perhaps we should be thorough,” Humphrey said.

“Agreed,” Jason said.

“Alright, we’ll compromise,” Henrietta said. “I’ll sweep my aura senses from above through that cave system. It should be between here and the centre of the maze, right?”

“I can put us right over it, using my map,” Jason said. “Maybe we should actually go down and take a look, though.”

“By crawling through a wet tunnel at the bottom of a well?” Neil said. “If there were still cultists here, then they would have killed the people who came to burn this place down. Or left, if it happened before they came back.”

“It does seem worthless as a place to hole up,” Clive said. “Without the manor, it’s just a place they’ve been known to use in the past. That makes it all threat and no value. Even if they came here, they would have moved on.”

“That does make sense,” Humphrey acknowledged.

“Still, I’ll do the aura sweep, just to be thorough,” Henrietta said. “We don’t want to go regretting it later.”

From within the edge of the estate grounds, Timos and Zato watched the skimmer disappear into the distance.

“Consider this a formal apology,” Zato said. “I thought your ideas were overwrought. Burning down the manor and moving everyone into the cave. Using so many of our

resources setting up the aura suppression. You protected our final chance. Even if we killed them, more would come looking.”

“Our work here will take months,” Timos said. “I knew someone would come, eventually. I remained hidden in Greenstone for so long because I was more careful and more thorough than anyone believed I had reason to be. If the leadership hadn’t felt Thadwick was worth risking exposure, I’d be hidden there still.”

“You’ve made a believer out of me,” Zato said. “You’re in charge of keeping us secure. Whatever measures you think necessary, take them. So long as it doesn’t compromise the work.”

The team moved south from the Vane Estate, following the direction, but not the path Jason had once taken to the Mistrun River. The direct route they had taken at that time had required most of a week on foot. The team anticipated taking about the same amount of time because of their zig-zag route that would visit all the local towns and villages, with all the time it would take to clear off their adventure boards.

The skimmer garnered attention as it arrived in the North-East Quarry Village Number Four. Such a magical conveyance was only ever used by adventurers or big shots coming to check out the quarry operations, so the villagers immediately knew that important visitors had come.

The village was situated in a ring around a lake fed by a channel leading from the nearby mountain that was the site of the quarries. A waterfall sprayed out of a hole in the mountainside, feeding the channel.

“I was sprayed out of the mountain by that waterfall,” Jason said, pointing it out.

“Why would you jump into that spray?” Sophie asked.

“I was up there taking a look when it turned off,” Jason said. “Me and another bloke were taking a look when it turned back on.

“It’s fed by an aperture, right?” Henrietta asked.

“That’s right,” Jason said.

“There were a number of instances of the aperture’s being interrupted,” Clive said. “It was the whole reason the expedition was formed in the first place. That must have been one of the earliest incidents. What happened, exactly?”

“I was standing right next to the stream when it stopped. The caretaker and I went for a closer look and a shab came through. It was my first iron-rank monster. We killed it, and then the water turned back on. It threw me, the other guy and a bunch of extra shabs right off the side of the mountain. It was kind of awesome, actually. Most of the shabs died

when they hit the ground, but a few survived by landing in the water, although they still took a good hit from that height. Rufus, Gary and Farrah were off chasing the guy that set them up for the blood cult, so me, the other guy and Colin finished the shabs off.”

Their arrival having been noticed, the mayor was soon hurrying out to greet them.

“Jason? Jason Asano?”

“G’day, Greg,” Jason said, shaking the mayor’s hand. He looked Jason up and down, taking in the dark combat robes, a sword on one hip and a dagger on the other, his bandolier full of throwing darts.

“Look at you, all intimidating,” Greg said. “Every inch the successful adventurer.”

“I wouldn’t rush to conclusions,” Jason said. “I’m the reason my team got stuck with punishment detail.”

“Yes, I do recall your friend mentioning you would be by soon enough. Are they doing well?”

Jason forced himself to keep the easy smile on his face as he recalled Farrah’s flippant remark.

“Let me introduce you to some new friends,” he said, giving Greg all their names.

“Geller?” Greg asked. “As in…”

“No, not those Gellers,” Jason said. “These two are from the other Geller family. Very big in the peat trade. As the saying goes, if you want to find a Geller, look in that disgusting peat bog. These are some of the first to go into adventuring. Not the actual first, though. It was a shame about the others. Such an undignified way to die.”

Henrietta watched Jason from under raised eyebrows as Neil shook his head. Humphrey took it in stride, also shaking the mayor’s hand. Greg led them into the village, along the ring road that circled the lake. They drew a lot of attention, some people coming up and greeting Jason by name.

“My daughter still has that spirit coin you gave her when you had her run from the monsters. She keeps it in a box like a treasure.”

Jason would share a few words before they let let the intimidating cluster of adventurers move on.

“Dan,” Jason greeted one man. “We’ll have to get some of that grilled giant worm.”

“Not this time of year,” Dan said as he shook Jason’s hand. “We don’t take them during their breeding season. I can do you a steamed pockmark lizard, if you like.”

“Sounds terrible,” Jason said. “I’m in.”

“I don’t get it,” Neil said as they made their way to the adventure notice board. “You were here for what? A couple of days, half a year ago?”

“It was three, I think,” Jason said.

“How do you know all these people?”

“You aristocrats are all about dignity and status,” Clive said. “We regular folk appreciate someone who doesn’t climb up on their high horse. And say what you will about Jason, it’s clear that if he was ever on a high horse, he fell off.”

The team found the adventure board notices and Henrietta looked them over.

“There’s nothing impressive here,” she said. “If you like, Asano, you can stay here while the rest of us handle these and pick you up after. You seem to have some catching up to do.”

“That would be nice,” Jason said. “I can call in on an old friend.”

“Three days, six months ago,” Neil said again. “How do you have old friends?”

“The Magic Society have actually been looking into it,” Jason said. “It turns out that once you cross a certain charisma threshold, it starts warping reality around you.”

“Just to be clear,” Clive said, “The Magic Society has not been doing that.”

Jason was sitting in the yard of Hiram, the caretaker of the local astral space aperture. They had been thrown off the mountain and fought the monsters that emerged from it together. His home faced onto the lake, where his granddaughter splashed about with some of the neighbours’ children.

“Things here have been just fine,” Hiram said. “I want to hear all about your exciting adventures.”

“I might have had a close call or two,” Jason said. “There was actually something of a contest for adventurers that...”

Jason trailed off as rainbow light started shining from the middle of the lake. He leapt out of the lounge, stern gaze locked onto that light. It was growing rapidly, to a size indicating a bronze, or possibly even silver manifestation.

“What is it with this village? Hiram, you need to evacuate. Everyone, the whole village. If you have some kind of shelter, put them in it. Otherwise, just get everyone as far away as you can.”

“How long before it finishes manifesting?” Hiram asked.

“If it’s bronze-rank,” Jason said, “maybe quarter of an hour. I can probably handle that, though. If it’s silver you have twice as long, but there won’t be anything I can do.”

Hiram nodded and headed for the children who had stopped playing and were looking at the beautiful rainbow vortex.

Chapter 202

Swat

Jason extended his shadow arm to the roof of Hiram's house as his shadow cloak appeared around him. He reduced his weight and retracted the arm, pulling himself lightly onto the roof. He looked around the village and saw people scrambling to get their families and go. They knew what a monster manifestation meant and none of them had seen anything as large as the rainbow vortex now shining over the surface of the lake.

The rest of his team was out of voice communication range. They would be back some time in the next few hours, depending on how long it took them to chase down the monsters they were hunting.

Jason turned his grim gaze back to the vortex. It was definitely going to be silver rank, which gave the villagers more time, but it wouldn't be enough. There was no way to evacuate the whole village in half an hour, not with children and the elderly. Someone was going to have to buy them time and the only person on hand was him.

He had no illusions of defeating a silver-rank monster. He was confident against a bronze-ranked one, even a bronze-rank essence user, if they were of the mediocre variety that inhabited Greenstone's lower rungs. A silver-ranked monster, though, was not something he could beat. Even with his powers to reduce the resistances of an enemy, his afflictions would spatter off anything silver-rank like rain off an umbrella.

Essence users advanced in a well-rounded manner, with all their attributes going up with rank. Even if they had no powers to boost them, every essence user would be faster and stronger than they were at the rank before. Monsters did not conform to that balance. Some were fast, some were strong; others were physically weak yet possessed potent magical powers. Jason needed the silver rank monster to be big and slow, just as he normally preferred.

If it was big and slow, there was a good chance he could kite the monster away from the villagers. If it was fast, or had some strange powers, it might well kill Jason in moments before rampaging through the fleeing villagers. Jason watched and waited, knowing that life or death for himself and hundreds of others was just a matter of fortune.

This was the third magic manifestation Jason had witnessed, after the awakening stone and the other silver rank monster. Silver-rank monsters were rare in the low magic region, yet he had been close to two of them manifesting in a month. It was possible the monster surge was imminent after all.

He had been told that no two manifestations happened exactly the same way, although he was having trouble getting excited for it, with his mind dwelling on his likely imminent death. Eventually, the rainbow vortex started to shrink, coalescing into a sphere that grew brighter and brighter, until Jason had to shield his eyes against it. He could see the village washed in blue light, as if a cerulean sun had appeared over the lake. Then the light dimmed and he was able to look again. He watched the sphere of blue light drop into the water and vanish.

There was an odd stillness from Jason's perspective, although in the distance he could still see villagers scrambling to flee. The light show had done nothing to allay their fears. Around Jason, though, all was quiet.

The moment passed as a humungous plume of water erupted from the lake, geysering into the air like a bomb went off in the depths. Waves rippled outward, rocking the boats tied up at jetties along the shore. Lake water fell like rain and Jason feared a repeat of what happened in the city with the small army of elementals.

Jason strained his aura senses at every pool and puddle that was forming, looking for manifesting elementals. He found the water seemed blessedly inert, aside from the single silver-rank aura bulging out from the centre of the lake. His eyes tracked to the very centre of the lake, where not all the water had fallen back down. Some had taken the form of an elemental, standing on the surface of the lake.

The elemental was unlike the formless blobs he had seen in the past. It resembled a statue, carved from water and filled with chunks of rock floating through its liquid body. It looked like a person, an armoured woman with greaves, breastplate and helmet, even a shield in one hand. In the other was a long whip, trailing from her grip down to the lake. The whip was filled with what looked like razor sharp stones along its length.

Quest: [Evacuation]

The villagers of North east Quarry Village Number Four need time to get their people away from the monster that appeared in their midst. You are all that stands between them and a quick death.

- Objective: Delay [Oasis Tyrant] until the villagers escape or help arrives.
 - Reward: [Amulet of the Dark Guardian].
-

Jason let out a breath, realising that all the news was good. Normally an elemental was a bad matchup for him, but anything at silver-rank was as immune to his afflictions as

an elemental anyway. Elementals of the water and earth variety were not known for speed, which was the province of wind and fire types. Most importantly, it was alone. It would be powerful, but all he had to do was distract the one monster for as long as the villagers took to get away.

If he could keep it from going after the villagers until they were gone, then that would be a win. If he could do it long enough for the others to get back, it would be a triumph. Henrietta was the only one who would have the power to fight the monster and even that would be no easy fight.

Jason called out Shade and Gordon. Colin would be most useful remaining in his bloodstream, healing the injuries Jason would inevitably be taking.

“Shade, I’ll be relying on you for movement. One of you stays with me, keep your other bodies where I can jump to them at need. The villagers are escaping to the north, so we’ll start by heading south. We’ll use the building ringing the lake for cover and slowly work our way around. By the time we reach where the villagers are now, they should be gone. Gordon, stick with me. When I shadow jump, catch up as quick as you can.”

Jason drew his sword and looked at the elemental. Despite not having eyes, it was turning its head as if panning its gaze around the village.

“Gordon, grab its attention.”

Twin beams blasting out from the eyes orbiting the avatar of doom signalled the beginning of the fight. The elemental, standing on the surface of the lake, turned its gaze from the village to hone in on Gordon.

The elemental was a towering figure, three times the height of the house Jason was standing on. Just as he had hoped, it’s steps were slow and ponderous, even though it walked over the surface of the water as if it weighed nothing. Once it drew closer, however, Jason discovered he hadn’t gotten off as lightly as he believed. The elemental flicked its tree trunk-thick whip of water and razor rocks in Jason’s direction.

The elemental might have been slow but the whip was not. Jason barely had time to leap off the roof before the whip smashed through the front wall of Hiram’s house. As it yanked the whip back again, the roof was torn in half, what was left collapsing into the interior.

Gordon had followed Jason from Hiram’s rooftop to that of the next cottage by turning into a nebula cloud of blue and orange energy. In could form he made a rapid dash through the air before returning to his normal state. Jason was able to make such a huge leap to the next rooftop because of the jumping magic on his boots. At that moment, he

was sending a silent blessing in the direction of the Bert brothers, Gilbert and Filbert, who had found them for him.

The fight between Jason and the elemental was not a fight at all. It was a cat and mouse game, a housekeeper swatting at a skittering bug. Gordon would emerge from between a pair of buildings and fire beams at the elemental. Jason would use that distraction to extend his shadow arm and land a blow with his sword, striking at the whip.

While the elemental used it as if it were a separate weapon, it was part of the elemental itself. It didn't really matter, since the sword was all but harmless. The goal was to hold the elemental's attention. After attacking, Jason would vanish into Shade before Shade himself flickered away like the shadow of a cloud.

The game was not an easy one. Because the whip was an animate part of the elemental, it was not bound by the motion of an actual whip. It lashed and flailed, snaked and sought in pursuit of its elusive prey. As Jason and Gordon hid amongst the trees and garden, homes and shops, the passage of the whip devastated them all. Cottages were smashed to rubble, trees slapped right out of the ground in the attempt to swat down Jason and his familiars.

Jason ducked amongst the trees and buildings, sprinting, leaping, teleporting. It was close call after close call as the whip snaked around or smashed right through the obstructions he was using as cover. He was continually forced to find new ground to hide in as the monster smashed its way around the village in a circle. He realised that he was burning through village faster than the villagers could evacuate it. The contest was not just whether Jason could survive, but whether the villagers could evacuate while there was village to evacuate from.

From his first day of training, Gary had been hammering movement skills into Jason, and Sophie had taught him even more. She seemed to have a preternatural sense for motion, helping him incorporate each new power in efficient, innovative ways. All that training and practise was showing its value as he was pushed to the limit of his abilities and beyond.

In the crucible of action he was pulling off wild stunts he had barely learned for the simple reason that he had to. He wasn't even sure he had adrenaline anymore, but it felt his whole body was flush with it. He would leapt up high, floating with his cloak as he tugged himself through the air by gripping a tree or building with his shadow arm. It allowed him to air dodge the crashing whip as it tried to slap him into the ground.

He dashed wildly through the increasingly ruined village, retaliating only enough to make sure the elemental kept coming after him. The pinpricks of his sword weren't truly hurting it but seemed to annoy and frustrate as it became more wild in thrashing the whip.

Gordon was a loyal companion, following Jason's wild rush through the ruins of the once-beautiful village. Gordon's normal form was not swift, so he spent more time in his rapid, nebulous cloud form than not. Meanwhile, Shade was constantly repositioning his bodies to give Jason places to teleport to.

One of Shade's bodies was the first casualty, left behind as Jason barely teleported through it in time. The whip did not have any inherent power to affect incorporeal objects, but the silver-rank monster was so infused with magic that it ripped apart the iron-rank familiar.

Gordon was the second casualty. His cloud dash was fast but his reflexes were otherwise sluggish. He took one glancing hit, then a second, before a square blow slapped him into nothingness, his vessel dissipating entirely.

Jason was increasingly feeling the pressure. Losing one of the Shades hampered his mobility and he no longer had Gordon as a secondary distraction. When he had the chance he glanced to the evacuating villagers, confirming his fears that he wasn't buying enough time. The village was being wrecked faster than they could vacate it, the destruction moving closer and closer to their evacuation point. Just as despair began to well up, he received blessed relief.

-
- Contact [Clive Standish] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Henrietta Geller] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Sophie Wexler] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Belinda Callahan] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Neil Davone] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Humphrey Geller] has entered communication range.
-

"HELP!" he screamed through the voice chat. "SILVER-RANK MONSTER!"

Henrietta's voice came back through the voice chat in a stream of expletives.

"She means we're on our way," Humphrey said. "How long do you think you can hold out?"

"Frankly, I'm surprised I lasted this..." Jason said before cutting himself off to duck under a sweeping whip strike that shattered the wall behind him and showered him in debris.

"If you could hear extraneous sounds," Jason said as he sprinted off, "you would have just heard a house collapse. Can't really talk."

“Stay sharp and stay alive, Asano,” Henrietta said. “We’re on our way.”

Renewed hope filled Jason with fresh determination. The villagers needed him to keep the monster away from them and he was running out of village, so he was forced to stay longer in the already-wrecked sections where the cover wasn’t as plentiful and the elemental could more easily track his movements. He took greater risks and more desperate chances. Finally, one of the increasingly close calls was too close and the whip found its mark.

It was little more than a glancing blow but Jason felt like he’d been hit by a truck, his body skipping like a stone across the ground before crashing into a wall. Barely able to move, he reached down and took a vial from his potion belt. The enchantment on the belt protecting them from incidental damage was one of his oldest items and he silently thanked Gary for insisting he buy it. Thumbing the stopper from the vial, he tipped it down his throat.

Item: [Lesser Miracle Potion] (iron rank, legendary)

Salvation in a bottle (consumable, potion).

- **Effect:** Fully restore health, mana and stamina. This potion is only effective on normal and iron-rank individuals. The magic of this potion lingers in the body longer than normal potions, preventing additional healing and recovery items from being effective for a longer period.

Jason experienced a sensation unlike anything he had ever felt. Power, strength and vitality were a raging river, crashing through his body. It was performing at a packed-out arena; winning a grand final. It was being born while having an orgasm. He vaulted to his feet, ignoring the rents in his combat robes. The whip was coming in to finish the job, but he suddenly felt like he could beat the elemental single-handed.

Fortunately, that delusion passed quickly and he got out of the way. His shadow hand snaked out, much like the whip that was chasing him, to snatch up his dropped sword and continue the fight.

Over the course of the chase, Jason had landed many hits with his sword and built up considerable charges of extra force damage. He estimated it was more than any previous encounter, yet the iron-rank weapon took no more than thumbnail-sized divots out of the silver-rank elemental.

Jason continued his mad dash, buying as much time as he could as his situation deteriorated. Shade’s second body was destroyed, then his third. In Shade’s absence he was conjuring and re-conjuring his cloak as he teleported through it to any shadow he

could see. The reinvigorating effect of the potion was spent as he burned through stamina and mana both, riding more and more on the edge. Hiding had become a constant state of evasion, his body riddled with cuts from debris smashed into flying shards. He no longer had time to check on the villagers, or try and slow down the destruction of their village.

The end came when he sensed a bundle of new auras approaching. He recognised his team and let out a weary laugh. That moment's distraction proved costly as the whip slammed into him. A stone shard within the whip tore across his torso as it sent him careening through the air. He was already unconscious when he hit a wall like a bug on a windshield.

Chapter 203

The Purpose of the Adventure Society

Jason returned to consciousness to find a small face looking down at him.

“GRANDPA!” she yelled at a brain-rattling volume. “He’s awake!”

“He’s also a little delicate,” Jason croaked as Hiram’s granddaughter skipped off to find her grandfather.

He brushed aside the system messages for the moment to push himself into a sitting position and look around. He was in one of the cottages in the village from the looks of it, but not Hiram’s. That had been the first one destroyed under the whip that swept through the village like a wrecking ball. The bed he was laying on was in a small bedroom, with a large open window letting in pleasant fresh air.

As he was glancing around, Hiram made his way into the room, along with Humphrey and Neil. Neil pushed his way to the front and started examining Jason by pulling a crystal from his dimensional satchel and waving it over Jason.

Jason looked down as he did, spotting a scar running from his right hip to the middle of his torso on the other side. Neil spotted his gaze.

“Nothing I can do about that,” Neil said. “Soul scar. Physically, you’re fine, just very depleted. Don’t go trying to rush your recovery with stamina and mana potions, though. You’ve been asleep for four days, so take it slow.”

“Four days?”

“I’m not sure you realise how close to death you came,” Neil said. “We almost fed you a lesser miracle potion before I checked for potion toxicity and realised you were still getting over one. The state you were in, another one would have finished you off. If it weren’t for your outworlder body and that familiar inside you, I doubt you’d have lived long enough for my healing to take effect.”

“Thanks, Neil,” Jason said. “And thanks to you too, Colin. What about the monster?”

“Henrietta took care of it,” Humphrey said. “It wasn’t easy, though. She lost a couple of her familiars and had to resummon them after.”

“I did too,” Jason said. “I’ll need to get the materials, though. I only have the bronze-rank equivalent I bought for when I rank up.”

He swung his feet off the bed and held out a hand. Humphrey took it and helped him to his feet, supporting him when he staggered.

“Take it easy,” Neil said. “You’re still recovering from all that healing. We’re not going anywhere for at least another day while you recover. I’m guessing you’re hungry?”

“Yeah, now you say it.”

“Spirit coins, one every hour or so to replenish your reserves. No food for at least a day.”

“How flexible is the no food thing.”

“Not flexible at all,” Neil said. “Normally I’d tell you that if you want to mess up your recovery, that’s your business, but you’re part of this team. We have to rely on you, so get it right.”

Jason gave Neil a grateful smile.

“Alright, mate. The food stays stashed in my storage space for now.”

“You don’t have to go that far,” Neil said. “The rest of us can eat food while you watch and suck on a spirit coin.”

“Oh, that’s cold.”

“How are you feeling?” Neil asked.

“Tingly. Weak.”

Jason looked himself up and down. He was wearing only the silk boxer shorts he’d had on when he was knocked unconscious. The combat robes and underclothes were gone, as was the blood and sweat he was certain had stained them during the fight. Someone had clearly stripped him down and tipped some crystal wash over him.

“That’s normal,” Neil said. “As long as you keep eating spirit coins and focus on rest, you’ll be back to full strength in a day or two. I’d recommend using the time to meditate.”

Jason spotted his combat robe on a wall hanger, dangling from a peg. Like him, four days had been enough for it to recover as the self-repair magic restored it to pristine condition. Also like him, it had been cleaned.

“Thank you for what you did,” Hiram said as Jason took the robe and placed it into his inventory.

“Was it enough?” Jason asked as dark mist appeared around his body, obscuring him for a moment before disappearing, revealing Jason changed into casual clothes. “Did everyone get away?”

“There was a lot of debris flying around, even at a distance,” Hiram said. “There were a lot of cuts and scrapes, but your team’s healer saw to everyone after he had you settled. Hard worker, that one. We did lose a pair of elderly people. Their family were out of the village and with everyone in a mad panic, no one checked on them.”

Jason hung his head. “I’m sorry, Hiram.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” Hiram admonished. “Nothing at all. Do not even try and apologise after fighting a monster like that.”

"I wouldn't call it a fight," Jason said. "More like a mad scramble to not die."

"You did better than anyone had any right to expect," Humphrey said. "Not many iron-rankers would have even tried what you did."

"You would have done it," Jason said.

"I wouldn't," Neil volunteered. "I'd have run as fast as I could while complaining I didn't have powers to run faster."

"I get that," Jason said with a chuckle. "That's pretty much what I did."

Jason took out an iron spirit coin and slipped it into his mouth. He grimaced at the ozone taste.

"Good boy," Neil said and Jason groaned in complaint.

"Feel ready to go out?" Hiram asked. "There's a lot of people waiting to thank you."

"No thanks," Jason said. "Let Belinda turn into me and they can thank her."

"If you're going to run around playing hero," Neil said, "you'll have to accept people treating you like one."

"What Neil means is that the people here want to show you their gratitude," Henrietta said, walking into the room. "Part of the job is to let them. They need to know that the Adventure Society will be there when they need it most. The purpose of the Adventure Society, after all, is to let people live, without living in fear."

She glanced at her brother, then turned back to Jason.

"Our family has certain views on what makes a real adventurer", she said. "A lot of adventurers get caught up in the money and power of what we do and put aside the responsibility. You're a real adventurer, Asano, and let no one tell you differently. How are you, by the way."

"He's as well as can be expected," Neil said. "He's still a day or two from getting back on the road, though."

"Can't he rest sitting in the skimmer?" Henrietta asked.

"It would be better if he has the freedom to walk about a bit and the peace to meditate without the skimmer's air intake roaring behind him."

"Alright," Henrietta said. "Are you ready to go out and meet with people, Asano? You might as well get it over with."

"No, I'd like a little time to gather myself. I'll be out in a minute."

The others shuffled out of the small room and Jason sat back on the bed, turning his attention to the system messages he had banished to the periphery of his vision.

Quest: [Evacuation]

- Objective complete: Delay [Oasis Tyrant] until the villagers escape or help arrives.
- Quest complete.
- 100 [Silver Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
- 1,000 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
- 10,000 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
- [Amulet of the Dark Guardian] has been added to your inventory.

Jason took the item reward from his inventory. It hung on a chain made of intricate links of carved obsidian. The amulet itself depicted a replica of Jason's personal crest, a cloak filled with daylight sky, surrounded by the night.

Item: [Amulet of the Dark Guardian] (growth, iron rank, legendary)

A protective amulet with the power of a shadowy guardian (jewellery, necklace).

- This item is bound to you and cannot be used by anyone else.
- Effect: For each instance of an affliction applied to an enemy, gain an instance of [Guardian's Blessing]. You may bestow all instances of [Guardian's Blessing] upon another person by touch.
- [Guardian's Blessing] (boon, holy): Instances are consumed to absorb damage from any source. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. For each instance consumed, gain an instance of [Blessing's Bounty].
- [Blessing's Bounty] (heal-over-time, holy, stacking): Heal over time. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

Growth Conditions (bronze):

- Bound user must be at least bronze rank.
- 100 bronze-rank barrier quintessence gems.
- 100 bronze-rank renewal quintessence gems.
- 100 bronze-rank balance quintessence gems.
- 100 bronze-rank malign quintessence gems.
- 1000 bronze rank spirit coins.
- Ritual of bronze ascension.

Jason clasped the chain behind his neck, slipping the amulet under his clothes.

"I think you and I are going to get along just fine."

It did mean more materials he had to buy, however. He had blown most of his money on getting materials ready for bronze rank, plus the resources he had been literally pouring into the cloud flask. He had brought two sets of bronze-rank summoning materials for each

of his familiars, in case their vessels were destroyed, but he hadn't expected it to happen while he was still iron rank. Replacing the materials to resummon Shade would be bearable, but even the iron rank materials for Gordon were onerous.

Fortunately, the quest had given him a monetary haul, which should put a dent in his costs. He also had the loot from the elemental. Neil had used his own looting power on it after Henrietta defeated it. The team decided that Jason and Henrietta should split the loot, as both had expensive summoning rituals to perform as a direct result. Along with the spirit coins, Henrietta had laid claim to a magical bronze-rank whip made of water filled with razor-sharp stones. Jason received an epic-rarity discord essence.

He turned to the other system message.

New Title: [Resolute]

- The damage you suffered in your stand against a much more powerful enemy has marked your soul. Your resistance to the suppressive force of higher-ranked auras is increased.
- Your aura signature has changed. Your unflinching resolve can be detected if your aura is examined by an aura sensing power or when projecting your aura.

Jason unbuttoned his shirt and traced his fingers along the scar, from his right hip, across his abdomen and curving a little way around the left side of his torso. It was strange to see a scar that looked healed, yet he had only found there minutes before.

Once again, he had edged right up to death. The more his powers grew, the greater the dangers he faced. This time has been a greater escalation than he had been looking for, though. He thought back to those moments when he was waiting for the monster to manifest, unsure if he would live or die.

In the end, he was lucky with the monster that appeared. Too many times it had been luck that kept him alive. From the beginning, he had become an adventure to seize control of his own fate. He had to get stronger, strong enough to face any challenge. He stood up, his face full of steely resolve. Then he got dizzy and sat down again, before getting up more slowly.

The waterfall sprayed out of the mountain, falling into the pool at the base, flowing into the channel that fed the lake around which the village was built. The force of the water sent it tumbling through the air instead of washing down the cliff face, leaving a space under waterfall at the base of the cliff. It was a favourite play area of the village children,

jumping from the rocks into the pool. They were all strong swimmers, which was an oddity for children of the desert.

None of the children were present, most of the families having already left the village. Those still present weren't letting their children out of their sight. With only a handful of homes left, most of the villagers had already headed for the fortified town where the regional villages waited out monster surges. Jason had visited that town himself, once, where Rufus had introduced him to the adventuring boards.

The remaining villagers occupied the small cluster of intact buildings. Leaving a small bedroom to Jason alone was a grand accommodation, in the circumstances. They had never intended to stay the night, so Jason had not set up his cloud house before the fight.

Quarry operations would not be resuming until the village was once again in a state to support them. Those that stayed behind were the mayor, the quarry operations manager and the other town leaders who were planning out the reconstruction of the village. Their plans were very up in the air, however, with the uncertainty surrounding the overdue monster surge.

Jason's experiences made him more comfortable with people being annoyed, confused or both than with sincere displays of gratitude. He did a lot of smiling and handshaking, while in his head he was waiting for a shoe that never dropped. Eventually Henrietta rescued him, telling the people that he needed more rest. Hiram quietly suggested the spot by the mountain, knowing Jason was going to go off and meditate.

He sat alone on a wet rock, meditating as errant waterfall spray splashed him with pleasant coolness. He let his mind drift and the weariness of his body fade away. Periodically he would emerge from a trance state, slip a spirit coin into his mouth and then resume meditation.

System messages appeared periodically, which he ignored until he felt a wellspring of power building up, filling his chest with an uncomfortable pressure. He coughed up phlegm speckled with blood, which splashed into the water. Blue grey light started to shine from within his body.

-
- Ability [Hand of the Reaper] (Dark) has reached Iron 2 (100%).
 - Ability [Hand of the Reaper] (Dark) has reached Iron 3 (00%).

 - All [Dark Essence] abilities have reached [Iron 3].
 - Linked attribute [Speed] has increased from [Iron 0] to [Iron 3].

 - Progress to bronze rank: 50% (4/4 essences complete).
-

Many of Jason's most advanced abilities had finally seen real movement in the wake of the fight, including the Midnight Eyes power which, in spite of barely being used, was within grasping distance of becoming Jason's first bronze rank power.

The sun was going down and it was time to return to the village where he had set up the cloud house. Before he left, though, he opened up his character sheet to look at his progress.

Jason Asano

Attributes

- [Power] (Blood): [Iron 7].
- [Speed] (Dark): [Iron 3].
- [Spirit] (Doom): [Iron 3].
- [Recovery] (Sin): [Iron 7].

Essences (4/4)

Dark [Speed] (5/5)

- [Midnight Eyes] (special ability): [Iron 9] 99%.
- [Cloak of Night] (special ability): [Iron 9] 12%.
- [Path of Shadows] (special ability): [Iron 8] 41%.
- [Hand of the Reaper] (special ability): [Iron 3] 00%.
- [Shadow of the Reaper] (familiar): [Iron 3] 09%.

Blood [Power] (5/5)

- [Blood Harvest] (spell): [Iron 7] 41%.
- [Leech Bite] (special attack): [Iron 8] 14%.
- [Feast of Blood] (spell): [Iron 7] 02%.
- [Sanguine Horror] (familiar): [Iron 8] 89%.
- [Haemorrhage] (spell): [Iron 8] 92%.

Sin [Recovery] (5/5)

- [Punish] (special attack): [Iron 8] 45%.
- [Feast of Absolution] (spell): [Iron 7] 63%.
- [Sin Eater] (special ability): [Iron 7] 69%.
- [Hegemony] (aura): [Iron 9] 18%.
- [Castigate] (spell): [Iron 7] 88%.

Doom [Spirit] (5/5)

- [Inexorable Doom] (spell): [Iron 8] 97%.
 - [Punition] (spell): [Iron 8] 24%.
 - [Blade of Doom] (spell): [Iron 8] 26%.
 - [Verdict] (spell): [Iron 6] 94%.
 - [Avatar of Doom] (familiar): [Iron 3] 12%.
-

He was now well and truly on the path to bronze. His newest powers hadn't been increasing much during training but the regular hunts as they travelled around, clearing adventure notices had seen a surge. By the time they reached the heights of his older powers, it would probably take bronze-rank monsters to really push him over the line in anything like timely fashion.

He got up and meandered back into the village, walking barefoot across the lush grass that grew alongside the channel, in defiance of the desert surrounds. He was struck again by the destruction visited upon the village. If the sudden preponderance of silver-rank monsters was any indication, he would have all the monsters he needed to rank up in the very near future.

Chapter 204

Elven Storage Solutions

The cloud house had taken the form of a large two-storey building of desert stone. Jason found Clive and Belinda out front, working on the scattered collection of parts that used to be the skimmer. After getting Jason's cry for help over voice chat, Clive had used a quick and dirty ritual to overcharge the skimmer. It had brought them to village in the nick of time, but also taken a toll on the vehicle. While Jason recovered, he and Belinda had been trying to repair it using the random collection of materials he happened to have in his storage space.

"How's it going?" Jason asked.

"We've figured out something that should last us the rest of the trip," Clive said. "It'll put all the burden on the parts that are still good, though."

"Which means the skimmer will be well and truly done by the time we get to the river," Belinda added. "It might not even make it, depending on how much chasing around after monster notices we do."

"We'll have it ready to go in the morning," Clive said.

"Jason, have you seen Sophie, yet?" Belinda asked.

"Not since I woke up," Jason said. "Was she looking for me for something?"

"No," Belinda said. "Just do me a favour and don't be too... you when you see her."

"Too me?"

"Yes," Belinda said. "You know what I'm talking about."

"I don't think he can help it," Clive said.

"Don't believe it," Belinda said. "He might seem all over the place, but it's a lot more deliberate than you think. I know a flim-flam man when I see one."

Jason flashed her a grin and went inside the house.

The team looked at the dark hole leading into the earthen bank. It was hard to think of it as a burrow when they could have driven the skimmer into it with room to spare.

Henrietta frowned at the dark opening, one of many they had spotted nearby.

"This one is dangerous," she said. "Dark hunters. Bronze rank, they appear in large numbers and like to dig themselves a warren of dark tunnels."

"I'll go," Jason said.

"I don't think going in there alone is a good idea," Henrietta said.

“Going with someone else would be more dangerous,” Jason said. “This is my kind of fight.”

A fight in the dark against powerful monsters was exactly what he needed to push his perception power over the edge. Humphrey and Clive, with their human advantage, had already reached bronze rank with their perception powers, gaining enhanced aura senses. Neil, who had been an essence user longer than Jason, had likewise reached bronze with his perception power. It gave him the ability to sense vulnerabilities in magical defences and detect injuries, both in allies and enemies.

“I’m not sure going into the dark all alone is a good strategy.”

“Going alone into the dark is my best strategy,” Jason said. “I’ve been practising fighting in various ways, this trip. Now it’s time to fight my way.”

Henrietta looked at Jason, seeing the usual whimsy absent from his expression. All that was there was confidence and determination.

“Very well,” she conceded. “I don’t want you to hesitate to call on us if it goes wrong, though. We’ve come close enough to losing you already.”

Jason walked forward, his cloak manifesting around him. As he went into the tunnels, stars on his cloak started floating into the air, turning pure darkness into dancing shadows. The rest of the team waited, with no indications of anything coming from the cave.

“Asano, are you alright?” Henrietta asked after a while.

“Yes,” Jason’s voice came back. “It’s about to begin.”

She concentrated on the hole in front of her, extending her aura senses.

“What is it?” Humphrey asked, seeing her focused gaze.

“Your aura senses are stronger now,” Henrietta told him. “Push them forward, into the caves.”

“You said dark hunters were good at concealing their auras,” Humphrey said.

“They are,” Henrietta said.

Humphrey did as he was told, concentrating his senses of the burrow entrance in front. Sophie and Clive did the same, using their own enhanced aura senses. It was hard to sense anything from within the warren, but they picked out an aura radiating fear and panic. It was coming closer, toward the burrow entrance directly in front of them.

A creature came stumbling out of the hole. It looked like a preying mantis the size of a Saint Bernard but with the stinger-tail and hard black exterior of a scorpion. It had lost a leg somewhere and was leaking dark fluids from beneath chitinous plates. From the darkness behind it came a cold voice.

“Mine is the judgement, and the judgement is death.”

Light shone down on the monster from nowhere, a glorious mix of silver, blue and gold. The beauty of it was belied by the effects of the transcendent energy that rapidly evaporated the monster into rainbow smoke. Jason didn't emerge from the hole, only the team members with bronze-rank aura senses catching a glimpse of his aura in the moment the spell was cast.

They spotted more monsters emerging from the other holes around them, evacuating their underground warren. The creatures ignored the adventurers as they skittered away as fast as their legs would carry them. Each was radiating an aura steeped in the same fear and panic as the first.

"That's odd," Henrietta said, frowning at the fleeing monsters.

"What is?" Humphrey asked.

"They're called dark hunters for a reason," Henrietta said. "I've never heard of them escaping into sunlight before."

Some of the monsters were faster than others, who were clearly impaired. The most damaged started dropping dead shortly after making the surface, while the others grew more and more sluggish over time until they too collapsed to the ground. Jason's exit from the warren was presaged by floating lights that returned to their place on his cloak as he emerged into the light.

He started making his way around the dead monsters, using his blood harvest power on all the bodies before looting them. He didn't need to refresh his mana any more after the first couple of monsters, but kept doing it to level his ability. Finally completing his rounds, he returned to the group as if he'd been out for a stroll, nodding at the skimmer.

"Shall we?"

It finally happened as Jason meditated on the roof of the cloud house. It began with a burning sensation behind the eyes, which became a sharp, twisting pain until it suddenly stopped.

-
- Ability [Midnight Eyes] (Dark) has reached Iron 9 (100%).
 - Ability [Midnight Eyes] (Dark) has reached Bronze 0 (00%).
 - Ability [Midnight Eyes] (Dark) has gained a new effect.

Ability: [Midnight Eyes] (Dark)

- Special ability (perception).
- Base cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
 - Effect (iron): See through darkness.
 - Effect (bronze): Sense magic.
-
- Ability [Midnight Eyes] (Dark) cannot advance further until all attributes have reached bronze rank.
-

Jason's vision swam and he was struck with potent vertigo. He rolled forward from his meditative pose, onto to all fours for stability as the world felt like it was tipping and turning around him.

Jason senses were filled with strange new stimuli. He could smell something strange on the air, carrying a faint ozone tang like the aftertaste of a spirit coin. He could feel his necklace and amulet, like electricity against his skin but not at all painful. He took it out of his shirt and it visibly shimmered with power. The much weaker magic woven into his everyday clothes was much milder, but still visible.

He pushed himself back into a sitting position as the dizziness became manageable. Around him, even the ambient magic in their air had become perceptible. It wasn't just his sight, either. He could feel it like a breeze on his skin, smell and taste it in the air. Actual magic objects like his amulet and boots had what looked like a shimmering heat mirage on them. He conjured his cloak and dagger and was able to see the mana emerge from his body like a blue mist before coalescing into the conjured objects. They were similar to his magical items under his new senses but still noticeably different.

The cloud house underneath him was a vast well of magic, although his perception couldn't penetrate beyond the exterior. He carefully pushed himself up on his feet, still a little unsteady. His vision was swimming, like he was looking at the world through a fish bowl. He stood in place and focused on regaining his equilibrium.

Eventually his sense of balance settled. His eyesight got under control and he took stock of just how differently he was perceiving the world. He could sense subtle shifts in the ambient magic around him but it was all too new to make any sense out of it. He would need time to become acclimatised to all the new sensory input.

Once he was sure of his balance, he made his way to the edge of the roof. The cloud house was once again in the form of a two storey building of desert stone, the rooftop giving him a broad view of the desert vista. He dropped lightly off the side, his cloak allowing him to drift gently down.

He could feel the conjured object like it was part of him as he fed it the extra mana to reduce his weight. His new senses, however, suggested it was not his weight that was being changed as he sensed it affect not him, but a field around him. It explained how he was able to share the cloak's power with others and he wondered if the actual functionality was to somehow affect gravity.

He alighted on the ground next to Sophie, who was just coming out of the building.

"Are you alright?" she asked. "I could sense your aura up on the roof and it was all over the place. You aren't normally that sloppy."

"I finally had that bronze breakthrough," he said. "Probably not a big deal for the person who got their first power to bronze years ago. So, are you talking to me again now? Counting the time I was unconscious, this is the first thing you've said to me in a week."

She shifted her gaze, not meeting his eyes. It was a stark contrast from her normal mode of glaring at the world like it owed her money.

"It's kind of obvious that you're giving someone the silent treatment when you're riding around the desert together in a half broken-down skimmer," he said.

"I'm not avoiding you," she denied.

"That might have sounded more plausible if you weren't avoiding eye contact right in front of me when you said it."

She lifted her head to stare defiantly at him but he spotted the vulnerability behind her eyes. He gave her his best reassuring smile.

"How about you tell me what the issue is and we'll see what we can do."

She frowned hesitantly and he watched her body language draw back.

"They told you that you were almost fed a potion that would have killed you, right?" she asked, voice muted and reluctant.

"It rings a bell," Jason said. "I'd just came out of a four day healing coma, so my retention rate wasn't ideal."

"They didn't tell you it was me, though, did they?" she asked. "I was the one who rushed ahead. If your voice chat wasn't still up, if Neil hadn't realised what I was doing and called out for me to stop..."

Jason blinked a couple of times, then let out a chuckle.

"I almost killed you and you think it's funny?"

"It is now," Jason said. "If you'd actually killed me I imagine I'd view it differently. You rushed to my side, you say?"

"Rushed might be a strong word," she back-pedalled. "I suppose you could call it a brisk pace."

He grinned and laughed again.

“I think some humanity is started to show under that stony façade, Wexler. Celestinity? Is that a word? Look, I’ll take a reckless desire to help over cold indifference any day. Well, not any day. I can think of some scenarios where... it doesn’t matter. The point is, I’m glad you rushed to save me. Yes, it didn’t go as planned, but you learned for next time. Instead of taking a potion, pick up Neil and carry him.”

“What was that?” Neil’s voice came from inside. He wandered out of the building to join the pair.

“Nothing Neil,” Jason called back. “We’re just discussing strategies to render healing assistance when someone has already taken a potion.”

“Oh, alright,” Neil said, then clearly realised what must have prompted the situation as an awkward expression crossed his face. “Uh...”

“You can go, Neil,” Jason said.

“Thank you,” Neil said quickly and ducked back inside.

“Oh, Neil,” Jason called after him.

“Yeah?” Neil’s voice drifted back out.

“Is there any chance you could stitch handles into your clothes?”

“Handles?”

Sophie stifled a snort of laughter.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “One somewhere on the upper torso, maybe under one arm, and the other on the thigh. That should be a good balance.”

“Asano,” Neil said, “I have no idea what you’re up to, but the answer is no.”

“Probably for the best,” Jason confided quietly in Sophie. “I think some kind of ruck-sack situation would be better. You’ll be able to run faster with him slung over your back. One of those child-carrier backpacks, but sized for a super-ripped elf. No, you don’t want to carry that lot around. Do you have occy straps here? Never mind, Belinda can probably knock some out with that power she has for creating regular items. Do you know where she is?”

“Alright, seriously,” Neil said, coming back outside. “What are you two talking about?”

“We’re trying to find Belinda,” Jason said innocently. “You haven’t seen her, have you?”

Chapter 205

Disbanded

The criminal culture in Greenstone was in a state of extreme flux. The Builder cult purge had turned over every rock in Old City, exposing many criminal enterprises. That the cult had attached themselves to many such clandestine operations only made things worse. Old City's criminal leadership thrived on being ignored by the Island, but now the powerful Island factions had placed their attention aggressively on Old City.

For the crime lords known as the big three, the purge had brought about very different results. Adris Dorgan was on the rise in the wake of his daughter being revealed as Director of the Adventure Society. When she came through the subsequent inquiry still holding her position, Dorgan's place in the city hierarchy was solidified.

He gained a powerful shield against pressure from the ruling elite. There were also rumours that he was heavily involved in the more secretive elements of investigating the Builder cult's activities, obtaining powerful concessions for his trouble. Whatever the truth, his operations had somehow come out of the purge stronger than before.

Clarissa Ventress had been extremely quiet, even before the purge. In the summer she had been pushing into Cole Silva's territory, trying to seize as much territory as she could. The goal had been to capitalise on the chaos following the old patriarch's death but Ventress had suddenly halted all such efforts overnight.

Rumours abounded as to the reason, but Ventress and her organisation quietly managed their existing affairs until just over a week ago, when word spread that Ventress was dead. The circumstances of her demise were being closely contained by her people, with her former bodyguard, the leonid Darnell, stepping into her position.

The change in leadership seemed to have been completed without too much contention but the air of uncertainty remained, becoming a pall dangling over their operations. Despite the relatively smooth transition, Darnell's power was extremely unstable, especially coming in the wake of the purge. The unease spread through his territory and his people, making them vulnerable to outside forces. Oddly, Adris Dorgan had made no move to exploit this weakness and expand, despite his own solid position. Instead, it was Cole Silva who seized the opportunity.

Silva had experienced similar problems after seizing the reins his father had left behind and was still in the process of consolidating power. Many in his own organisation were unhappy with the changes he was making to how they operated and much of the old leadership were in the extended process of being pushed out.

The purge had hit Silva's operations hard. Cole had finally brought things under control by making sweeping changes. The old guard were excised and new avenues of operation were established. Unlike his father, Cole had pursued his ambitions with no concern for whom he worked with or what they worked on.

Interests his father had always avoided were suddenly on the table, brining in new sources of revenue and control. The lucrative nature of the new operations was the factor that allowed him to finally unite the organisation fully behind him.

Silva's lax approach to choosing partners to operate with allowed a number of Builder cult operations to embed themselves within his organisation. As a result, many of his rackets had been scoured by forces of the Duke, the Adventure Society and even a coalition of noble families, spearheaded by the Mercers.

Despite this, Silva was taking the chance to grab as much of the territory Clarissa Ventress once controlled as he could. It left him juggling a lot of balls at once and a personal project had been put aside. He had been willing to let one of those projects hibernate as the object of his attentions had left the city for an extended period. Now Silva had information that Asano was due to return, and he was taking time from his territorial ambitions to set new events into motion.

Silva left his office in the Fortress, gesturing at his bronze-ranker bodyguard to follow. Silva himself was a bronze-ranker but he had nothing in the way of combat skills. His taste in violence was to enact it upon those too powerless to fight back it and had raised his rank purely through the consumption of monster cores. His bodyguard was one of five other bronze-rankers currently in his employ, the most powerful and valuable members of his organisation.

The Fortress was neutral ground for the Big Three, each controlling their own sections. Silva made his way to an elevating platform which only he and his most trusted men could access. They descended into the bowels of the building, deep into the underground vaults built centuries ago to shield the citizens at the time from monsters.

Killian Laurent was waiting for him in a luxurious subterranean lounge Silva used for his most clandestine meetings. His father had the room set out in subdued décor, but Silva had redecorated, marking the organisation's most private sanctum as his own. On the walls, wood panelling had been painted black while the thick new carpet was a brazen red. The simple and elegant furniture his father had favoured was replaced with plush satin chairs and loungers. The simple recessed glow stone in the ceiling had been replaced with a resplendent chandelier. In place of the restrained, old art works that had adorned walls were bold images of sex, violence and power.

“Mr Silva,” Laurent greeted. The pallid elf got up from where he had been perched on the edge of a chair, waiting. “If you are ready, I will bring our first guest.”

“Why wasn’t he already waiting here?” Silva asked.

“With respect, Mr Silva, this is a man you wait on, not a man who waits on you.”

Silva’s face grimaced with anger but he gave a curt nod and Killian departed through another door from the one Silva had used. Silva had become increasingly intolerant of anyone who challenged his power as he scraped his father’s old guard from the top of the organisation. Silver-rankers were not to be trifled with, however. There were rumours that one of his guests had been dealing with Clarissa Ventress and had ultimately been the object of her demise.

Silva crashed into one of the soft armchairs, gesturing for his bodyguard to fix him a drink. The drinks cabinet was one of the few things in the room that remained from his father’s tenure.

“Bring the bottle, then wait outside.”

By the time Killian returned he was three drinks in, the spirits fuelling the perpetually burning furnace of rage and resentment inside him. The man Killian returned with was fully obscured under a robe. Silva’s aura senses stopped dead when they met it suggesting silver-rank concealment magic.

“I usually like to know who I’m dealing with,” Silva said.

“Our guest is a man who greatly values his anonymity,” Killian said.

“You may call me Mr Sparrow,” the hooded figure said. There was a slight reverb to his voice, indicating voice disguising magic. “You have my thanks for the accommodations you have made. The arrangements have been very satisfactory.”

“Please, sit,” Killian said, although he remained standing as Silva and Mr Sparrow sat down.

“I understand you are looking to have someone taken quickly and quietly,” Mr Sparrow said.

“That’s right,” Silva said. “I want him placed in my possession, but it must be done in utmost secrecy. He’s known to be slippery, resourceful and elusive, so I need someone who can strike quickly and definitively. I am told this is an area of specialty for you.”

“It is,” Sparrow said. “Utmost secrecy is my preferred method of conducting my affairs, so I believe we should be able to reach a mutually satisfactory arrangement. Who is the person you want taken?”

“An iron rank adventurer,” Silva said. “Jason Asano.”

Sparrow sat up straight in his chair.

“I’ve heard of this Asano; you make a difficult request. He has powerful friends that will come looking for him.”

“They won’t find him,” Killian said with confidence. “We have established a secure and isolated location and Asano himself has an ability that prevents him from being tracked. So long as he is taken cleanly, then he cannot be traced using his Adventure Society badge.”

“That’s an easy claim to make,” Sparrow said, “but harder to verify. I have no interest in being hunted down by gold-rankers because your information was bad.”

Killian looked to Silva, who nodded.

“We have another guest who can allay your suspicions,” Killian said. “I shall go bring him in.”

“I’m not accustomed to waiting on others,” Sparrow said, a twang of annoyance getting through the voice masking magic.

“My apologies, sir,” Killian said, “but for this man, you do.”

Silva smirked at Sparrow being told the same thing he had been earlier. Killian left the room and Silva poured himself another drink, not bothering to offer one to Sparrow. The pair sat in silence, Sparrow seemingly impassive under the dark hood as Silva stewed in the feeling of not being the most powerful man in the room.

That feeling reminded Silva unpleasantly of the time before his father died. His father’s chief people would look at him with disrespect, spreading rumours that the old man would not pass the mantle to his son. Sophie Wexler was meant to have been the symbol of him seizing power; the woman his father had always shielded from him, finally in his grasp. Instead, she had become a symbol of his impotence, flaunting herself in front of her new high society friends.

Her Adventure Society membership had placed her truly out of his reach. If an adventurer went looking for trouble in the criminal underworld and found a knife in his gut, the Adventure Society would pass it off as self-inflicted damage. If the criminal underworld went looking for adventurers, though, the Adventure Society would crash down on them like a tsunami. It meant that even if they used, killed and dumped Wexler’s body quickly enough, there would be too many threads leading back to him.

Instead he would have to make do with Asano, the man who had intervened to deny her to anyone. The inability to track Asano gave them an opportunity that they would not have with other adventurers. It was still dangerous, which is why he had been hesitant when his second guest had suggested it. That guest was being led into the room by an obsequious Killian, Silva and Sparrow both rising from their seats at the new arrival.

“Lucian Lamprey,” Sparrow said, his modulator failing to hide the surprise in his voice. Lamprey looked at the hooded figure and a smirk crossed his face.

“Hello, Lawrence,” Lamprey said. “Do say hello to your sister for me.”

Sparrow flinched but didn’t respond to Lamprey’s jibe.

“What’s your interest in this?” Sparrow asked instead.

“The boy has aggravated me,” Lamprey said. “Anyone with eyes can see that he’s the kind of vermin you need to squash before it grows to large to deal with.”

Sparrow turned to Silva.

“What do you need me for, if you already have a silver-ranker?” Sparrow asked.

“Because when Asano vanishes and is never seen again, it won’t be too long before someone asks me where I was at the time. I’m going to make sure I’m visible enough that I can round up people like cattle to give me an alibi. Also, he has some kind of communication power. I can take him down, but not before he gets word out. We need someone who can take him down clean before he knows what hit him. That’s your specialty.”

“You’re certain he can’t be traced?”

“Completely,” Lamprey said. “The problem with these low-rankers with the power to avoid tracking is that any kind magic strong enough to punch through it burns out the aura imprint it’s trying to track. By the time they get strong enough for the powers to work, the little pricks are strong enough that then their power shields them from it. The Magic Society has been trying to solve the problem for years so they can track Adventure Society badges better. That same annoyance, though, gives us an opportunity to take Asano that we wouldn’t have with another adventurer. Otherwise, we’d take the girl.”

“You seem confident,” Sparrow said.

“Yes,” Lamprey said. “You don’t have to worry about anyone finding anything at the scene. Even if you’re sloppy enough that people find out where you took him from, the Magic Society won’t find anything useful, I’ll see to that.”

Sparrow started pacing back and forth.

“If I’m going to do this,” he said, “Asano can never see the light of day again. He has to be dead and buried.”

“Forget buried,” Silva said gleefully. “He’s going to be dead and scattered across the delta in tiny pieces for wildlife to eat. Eventually, anyway. Once there isn’t enough flesh left on him to feel pain.”

“You are going to do this,” Lamprey told Sparrow. “You knew that from the moment you saw me walk through the door, Lawrence. All that’s left is to haggle the price.”

“The price has been paid to my satisfaction,” Sparrow said.

“And what is Silva paying you?” Lamprey asked. “Actually, don’t tell me. Your predilections are appalling even to me, and that’s saying something.”

“Asano is already overdue to return to the city,” Killian said. “He could be back at any time now.”

“He was caught up in a silver-rank manifestation,” Lamprey said.

“Another one?” Killian said, frowning. “If the monster surge is starting, that will complicate the site we’ve set up to hold Asano in.”

“It isn’t the monster surge,” Lamprey said. “These manifestations are just precursor signs. It could be months before the surge hits in full force.”

“Then we act?” Silva asked.

“Yes,” Lamprey said.

“Then I will need details,” Sparrow said. “Everything you have on Asano, and where you want me to bring him.”

Killian gave an unctuous smile.

“I have everything you need.”

Pantero’s Bakery in the Cavendish district of Old City was always busy. For Jason, however, both a regular customer and a young adventurer on the rise, service always came quick.

“You brought a lot today, Mr Asano.”

“My team just got back into town, Mrs Pantero. We’re having bit of a celebration.”

“How long does it take to visit a bakery?” Sophie complained, then shook her head. “Look who I’m talking about. I once saw him go through half a cart of apples looking for the perfect ones for a pie. They’re pie apples. They don’t have to be that good.”

The team were lounging on the deck of the cloud houseboat, returned to its spot at the marina. Jory had joined them, having spotted them passing the clinic just as he was closing up for the day. He was now nestled next to Belinda, the pair sharing a large cloud chair.

“He is taking a while,” Henrietta agreed.

“I bet he spotted some new food in the window of a shop,” Jory said. “I’ve learned better than to walk down certain streets with him. If he sees something new to eat, you’re lucky if he just buys it instead of finding his way to the kitchen.”

“Oh, gods, yes,” Clive said with a laugh. “I was showed him this dumpling soup place once – you know the one, Humphrey - and Jason got a job there for about a week. Jory, you’re lucky he hasn’t suborned your alchemy lab for some grand cooking experiment.”

“Has the alchemy association been hounding you about the miracle potion recipe?” Neil asked him.

Jory had gifted the team on their return with the first batch of lesser miracle potions his alchemy facility produced. It was a thank you for Jason giving him the funding to build the facility in the first place.

“They’ve been restricting themselves to fairly blatant hints that they’d like the formula,” Jory said. “Now that I have the church of the Healer backing me, they aren’t pushing. I suspect if the Healer hadn’t made the clinic sanctified ground, they would have broken in to steal it by now.”

Suddenly the whole team went deathly still.

“What is it?” Jory asked.

-
- Party leader [Jason Asano] has had his magical abilities suppressed.
 - Ability [Party Interface] has been negated.
 - Your party has been disbanded.
-

Chapter 206

The Man Behind the Mouth

The room was almost entirely bare of features, a dark stone box with no windows. There was a heavy steel door, a recessed glow stone in the ceiling and a metal chain staked into the hard floor. The other end of the chain was affixed to a power suppression collar around the neck of a naked body. Jason was unconscious, laying on the hard stone.

On the other side of the door were Killian Laurent and the cloaked figure of Mr Sparrow. They were standing in another stone room, although this one was largely stacked with crates.

“You are confident you got away clean?” Killian asked.

“Short of a gold-ranker specialised in stealth and tracking having followed, then yes.”

“You have our gratitude, Mr Sparrow,” Killian said. “You will find your usual arrangements waiting at the usual place, but I have also arranged a little bonus I am confident you will find tantalising.”

“Then my part in this is done and I wash my hands of it,” Sparrow said. “You would be well-advised to not bring this matter up again, Laurent. You would be even better advised to make sure no one else brings up my participation in it.”

“I shall keep your advice in mind,” Killian said. “I believe you know that my discretion can be relied upon, Mr Sparrow.”

Sparrow’s hooded head nodded, then he stepped into a shadow and disappeared. With Sparrow gone, Laurent left the room. The building was nothing more than those two rooms, located right where the delta met the desert.

It had once been one of the way stations the Magic Society used to transfer spirit coin shipments from the farms. Disused for a number of years, the small outpost was both secure and isolated. It had been abandoned decades ago as more coin farms went into operation, changing the transport routes and requiring larger facilities. It had a paved area where shipments were transferred, the once level pavers now shifted and uneven.

There was a second, smaller building that had been the security station, with large, reflective windows. The alchemically treated glass both helped keep the interior cool and prevented those outside from seeing in.

Inside the security building were three people, including another of the precious few bronze-rankers in Silva’s organisation. Silva was intent on keeping the location secure and had hand-picked the three to manage the site. The bronze-ranker came out to meet Killian.

“Mr Laurent,” the man said respectfully. Of the bronze rankers under Silva, Killian was the unquestionable leader. “Thank you for refreshing the cooling magic on the security building.”

“Of course, Remi,” Killian said. “Mr Silva puts a great deal of value and trust in you. How are your people?”

“Coburn is solid. Not what you’d call a deep thinker, but he knows when to keep his ears open and mouth shut. The other one, Jerrick, has some real potential; I’ve worked with him before. I was surprised to see him selected for this, though. He’s only been in the organisation a few months.”

“Mr Silva prefers the newer people he recruited himself after clearing out his father’s old mainstays,” Killian said. “Those who have taken pains to demonstrate their loyalty are his most valued people. Otherwise, he prefers the people he has recruited and cultivated himself. It avoids any issues with nostalgic loyalties.”

Remi nodded. “The old man had too many scruples, leaving money on the table all over. Mr Silva isn’t caught up in old ways of thinking.”

“Just so,” Killian said. “Jerrick has a history with our guest. Asano is responsible for his being struck off the Adventure Society rolls, as well as ruining the man’s relationship with the nobleman he was working for.”

Remi frowned. “I don’t like personal connections,” he said. “It stops people from doing their job properly.”

“I am not unsympathetic, Remi, but Mr Silva felt that Jerrick would share his passion for seeing that Asano gets what is coming to him.”

“He’s the boss,” Remi said. “If he wants it, he gets it.”

Killian smiled with his thin, pale lips.

“That’s an attitude that will take you far, Remi. I am leaving, now, to bring Mr Silva. Remember that we want to maintain the illusion of this location’s abandonment.”

“We’ll stay in the building and out of sight,” Remi said.

“Check on our guest every hour,” Killian said. “Once he’s awake, give him a spirit coin to eat. Mr Silva wants him strong and healthy enough to survive what we have planned.”

The ache in Jason’s body as he regained consciousness paled in comparison to the pain digging into his brain like a railroad spike. It was an unpleasantly nostalgic feeling, taking him back to his first hours in this world when he had been knocked out multiple times in quick succession, only a few potions and a dose of healing magic staving off a lethal brain haemorrhage.

His first thought was to open his inventory and grab a potion, but his inventory window appeared in a haze of static before blinking out again. He tried to bring up other interface windows, receiving the same result. Muscles protesting, he pushed himself to a sitting position and fumbled at his neck, finding a thick iron choker. He had never worn a suppression collar but had used them on others. It was obvious that this was the source of his power problem.

He could still feel Colin inside his blood, but the connection to him that Jason normally experienced seemed strangely obstructed. He could tell that trying to bring out his familiar wouldn't work and even the attempt might have a painful backlash. On the bright side, Colin's power to heal him was still in effect. He could already feel the aches in his body clearing up and the fuzziness in his head fading away.

Jason took stock of his situation. His clothes were gone, although most of his adventuring gear was safely stashed in his inventory. The only important item missing was his new amulet. He sat cross-legged as he looked around.

He was in a room of desert stone. It was warm rather than cold, not too unpleasant to sit on. The sun-warmed brick meant that he probably wasn't underground, despite the lack of windows.

The chain linking him to the floor wasn't long enough for him to stand, only sit or kneel. Even leaning too far forward caused it to tug at his neck in a choking grip. The rest of the room had little to offer, just a heavy metal door and a glow stone in the ceiling.

He had no idea who had come after him, remembering nothing but a dark shape erupting out of an alley. It may have been a bronze-ranker, although a silver was more likely. He had a high-enough evaluation of his own powers to think that even a bronze-ranker would have trouble so thoroughly blindsiding him with darkness and stealth.

His circumstances weren't great, but not completely hopeless, either. If whoever had taken him wanted him dead, then he already would be. He didn't expect his near future to be pleasant, however. He suspected Colin's healing power would be very useful.

If you can hear me in there, Colin, stop the healing until I say so. If they don't know you can still help me, you can be my secret weapon for what comes next.

Although the connection was dimmed, Jason got a sense of assent from his familiar.

With no other options, Jason sat and meditated. A while later, Jason sensed the approach of a bronze-rank aura, meaning at least his aura senses remained intact. The person came into the room and Jason opened his eyes.

“You’ve got a henchman look about you,” Jason said. “I don’t suppose I could seduce you and secretly pocket the keys to this collar? Well, I say pocket.”

He indicated his naked body.

“It’s a figure of speech, obviously.”

The stony-faced man tossed a spirit coin at Jason, who caught it out of the air. “Eat. The boss wants you healthy for what he’s got planned.”

“I’m guessing it’s not a charity fun run. So, who’s the boss? If Tony Danza walks in here, I’m going to lose it.”

The man gave a confused frown and left without answering. Jason wondered how long he would be able to keep up the banter before whatever was coming took its toll. He examined the coin, but his interface again gave a fuzz of static and vanished without giving him any information. It seemed like an ordinary spirit coin, the crystalline object a dull iron colour.

He considered it unlikely to be some kind of trap. In his current situation they didn’t need subterfuge to make him ingest poison or some tainted object. Keeping his strength up was an obviously good idea, but he ultimately tossed it into the corner. In his studies of magic he knew there were certain kinds of magic, usually involving the soul, that required willing participation. Without it, the soul was largely inviolable, even to the most potent magical forces. He wasn’t willing to take the chance that eating the coin was the acceptance of some magical end user licence agreement

It was some time before the door opened again to admit two people. One was dressed in the kind of expensive style that made sure everyone knew how much their clothes cost. The cut seemed familiar and Jason suspected the man used the same tailor as Thadwick Mercer.

The man in the fancy clothes looked young. That was hardly an achievement, given the bronze-rank aura, but there was also an immaturity to his snide expression. Jason had known enough high-rankers to recognise a level of easy confidence and equanimity in those whose youth belied their age. This man had the look of a boy.

In addition to his looks, the boy-man’s aura marked him as mediocre. Jason’s perception power wouldn’t enhance his aura senses until it ranked up a second time, but he could almost smell the monster cores the man had used, as if he’d drenched himself in some nasty cologne. Jason doubted the man had ever faced a monster in the wild.

Next to the human was a startlingly creepy elf, whose dark clothes made the sickly, pallid skin stand out all the more. Jason suspected the man to have been altered by his essence powers. The kinds of powers that fundamentally changed a person were the kind

that usually landed the essences that produced them on the restricted list. Jason would not have been at all surprised to find the death essence in the man's repertoire.

"So," the boy-man said. "You're the Jason Asano that's been causing such a ruckus."

"If I said you had the wrong guy, I don't suppose you'd let me go?"

Jason was still sitting, cross-legged on the floor. The chain would not allow him to take his feet and face his captors.

"You have no idea how bad the rest of your short life is going to be," the boy-man said. "Do you even know who I am?"

"You're definitely not Tony Danza," Jason said. "If you're Judith Light, life has taken you down some very odd roads."

"What are you babbling about?" the boy-man asked.

"He's spouting nonsense to put you off," the elf said in a voice as creepy as the rest of him. "Don't let him distract you."

"So, you're the Palpatine to his Vader," Jason said to the elf. "I know the routine. Just to save you some time, giving in to my hatred will be an easy sell, under the circumstances."

"Shut up!" the boy-man yelled. "My name is Cole Silva."

"You're Cole Silva?" Jason asked.

"That's right," Silva said, gloatingly. "Now you understand what kind of trouble you're in."

"The name doesn't ring a bell," Jason said, brow creasing as he strained to recall. "Wait, did you sell me that dodgy magic food processor? The pulse setting on that thing was rubbish. Is this revenge for complaining to the Artifice Association about your shoddy standards? I think we both know that's really on you."

"I'm one of the Big Three!" Silva yelled. Jason suppressed a grin at seeing the elf clearly wanting to interject but unwilling to risk the younger man's temper.

"Oh, the crime lords," Jason said, realisation dawning in his voice. "I've met Adris Dorgan; very cool guy. He has that combination of class and masculinity that lets him really carry off that dapper look. Then there's Clarissa Ventress and that other one. I forget the name because everyone just calls him the stupid one. I have to say, Clarissa, you don't look anything like how you were described."

Silva lunged at Jason only for bones spears to erupt from the hard brick floor like a wall to block him off. Silva turned his furious glare on the elf.

"Mr Silva," the elf said. "Don't let him goad you into giving him a quick death. Nothing you can do will be worse than what we already have in store for him."

Silva fumed but enough of the rage drained away that he got himself back under control. Silva angrily tugged his clothes back into place as the bone spears disappeared, leaving holes in the stone floor. and then turned a malevolent grin on Jason.

“We’ll see if you’re still so clever once the pain begins,” Silva told Jason.

“I will be,” Jason said. “It just won’t show because of the screaming and begging. I’m pretty sure there’ll be begging. I don’t know what you want from me, exactly, but I hope it’s not dignity. You took my pants, though, so I’m guessing that’s not an issue.”

“All I want is for you to pay for the things you’ve taken from me,” Silva said.

“Which didn’t include fashion advice, thankfully,” Jason said. “You need to tone it down, which is really saying something with the way people dress in Greenstone.”

“I will be interested to see how long your courage holds,” the elf said.

“Oh, that’s long gone,” Jason said. “This is pretty much terrified babble I’m trying to pass off as bravado. The inability to wet myself is only thing selling it, at this point.”

The elf gave Jason a hungry smile.

Silva snorted derision. “You willing admit to fear?”

“I’m chained up, naked, in a room with the winner of a most obvious sex-predator contest and the guy who got disqualified for being too creepy. Not being scared is admitting to being an idiot.”

“Mr Silva, I think it’s time to show him.”

“Will he even know what it is?” Silva asked.

“I didn’t tell you?” the elf said. “Our friend here is the one who procured it in the first place.”

“Really?” Silva said with a sinister chuckle. “That’s almost poetry.”

A bone cabinet rose up out of the floor, reminding Jason of the stone chest storage space that Farrah had. This also proved to be a storage space as the elf took out an object Jason recognised. It was held in a cubic metal frame, a sphere made up entirely of tiny little bricks the colour of grey stone.

“Star seed,” Jason said, his face turning pale. “You’re with the Builder cult?”

“Not at all,” the elf said. “This is the very same star seed that you acquired and was taken by the church of Purity. When the temple’s assets were being seized, we managed to snag this little treasure. And now we are going to return it to you.”

Jason said nothing, fierce eyes locked on the elf.

“There he is,” the elf said with delight. “The man behind the mouth.”

“You’d best be very careful about what happens next,” Jason said, “or you might come to regret having met him.”

Chapter 207

Search

Killian began the elaborate preparations to use the star seed. He started by conjuring up skeletal arms that he used to hammer a spike into the ceiling, which he then hung a pair of manacles from. He unlatched the chain from Jason's suppression collar and then used the skeleton arms to force Jason's wrists into the manacles. Jason didn't bother to struggle, saving his strength.

Once Jason was hanging uncomfortably from the ceiling, Killian took a series of pouches from his bone storage cabinet, pouring powder from them to make a complex ritual circle under Jason's feet. When that was done he started placing objects into the circle. Some were simple bricks of precious materials, others were tools made from exotic metals.

"How exactly do you know how to do all this?" Jason asked.

"That's actually a good question," Silva said, watching from the side. "How did you learn a Builder cult ritual?"

"From a Builder cultist, obviously," Killian said. "You opened your operations to people your father would never deal with and the Builder cult seized the opportunity. When Thalia Mercer started kicking down doors, why did you think so many of them were yours?"

"You facilitated this?" Silva asked.

"Your exact words were 'more money, less questions,'" Killian said.

"He's put you in bed with the enemy of the whole world," Jason said. "Do you even know what the Builder cult is doing? They're plundering whole chunks of this world like dimensional pirates and they don't care who or what is destroyed in the process. That's not an association you can run far enough to escape, Silva."

"Shut up," Silva snarled.

"What's done is done," Killian said calmly. "The only way forward is forward."

Killian placed the final object, the star seed, directly underneath Jason.

"And now we begin," he said.

Thalia met Clive and Neil in one of the Mercer family receiving parlours.

"Neil," Thalia Mercer greeted. "Always a pleasure. And Mr Standish, hello again. You'll have to accept my apology but I can only spare a little time. The Builder cult has gone underground, which has made rooting them out all the more work."

"Then we'll go directly to the point," Neil said. "Jason Asano has gone missing."

Thalia frowned.

"You're sure it's foul play? I recall he went off without telling anyone once before, during the time he was seeing Cassandra."

"We're sure," Neil said.

"I'm not sure exactly how I can help," Thalia said.

"We're looking into anyone with the motivation to do something to Jason," Clive said. "You're the spearhead of the Builder cult investigation, now."

"You think the Builder cult might be behind it?" Thalia asked. "Revenge for taking a star seed from them? It seems like they would have larger concerns."

Clive and Neil both took on awkward expressions.

"That's true, Lady Mercer," Clive said. "We were thinking of another potential scenario. To be blunt, we're talking about Thadwick."

Thalia's expression went dark. "Thadwick is a prisoner. A victim."

"Most likely, yes," Neil said. "We're simply exploring every possibility, however remote."

"We don't understand how much of the original personality survives once a start seed takes over," Clive said. "It may well be that Thadwick's own personality is suppressed but the thing that's taken him over inherited his hatred of Jason and is acting on it."

"We both know that Thadwick had become fixated on Jason," Neil said to Thalia. "Jason had become the symbol of his recent setbacks."

"Even if what you're saying were true," Thalia said, "what could I do that I haven't already done? You think I haven't been trying to get my son back? He's been gone for months, now. For all we know, he was in the pile of bodies that Remore and his parents left on that island. They're still sorting through the bodies, trying to identify them all."

"The thing is," Neil said, "we've all been operating under the assumption that Thadwick has been wholly supplanted by the star seed."

"If he is more of a gestalt entity," Clive picked up, "then that may open avenues of investigation that you otherwise may have overlooked. Places that Thadwick would think to go."

"I may be emotionally invested in my son's return," Thalia said, "but I am not blinded by emotion. From the point we realised the cult was acting on Thadwick's knowledge we immediately tried every avenue we could think of that might be driven by his thinking, instead of the cult."

She got to her feet.

“That is all the time I have to spare,” she said, her voice cold and dismissive. “You know the way out, Neil.”

“Mr Remore,” Dorgan greeted. “Of course you are welcome in my home, but I didn’t realise we were meeting this openly.”

“Do you know why I’m here?” Rufus asked.

“The absentee Mr Asano, I can only assume,” Dorgan said. “My understanding is that he’s been known to go off without notice before.”

“This isn’t that,” Rufus said.

“Well, let me begin by asserting that I am neither responsible nor complicit.”

“Do you know who is?”

“I only met Mr Asano the one time,” Dorgan said. “He struck me as someone who likes to play games above his rank with a rather insufferable smugness. Frankly, I’m surprised it took this long for him to mysteriously disappear.”

“I need answers, not more questions.”

“Well, while there are any number of candidates, there are not so many stupid enough to risk the wrath of you and your friends. Or your parents. Good gods, no sane person would cross a pair of gold rankers.”

“Who would?”

“Cole Silva, probably. Poor judgement, fierce temper. I’ve known him since he was a boy. The girl too; she may be the only thing he was ever truly denied. I think you’ve deeply underestimated just how angry Cole is over being frustrated in the moment he thought he finally had her. Ventress understood the depths of that feeling and used it as a weapon.”

“You think Silva is responsible?”

“All I have for you is conjecture, based on my understanding of Cole. He’s arrogant enough but I’m not sure he would make the attempt without prompting. Even if he’s responsible, you may want to look elsewhere for the origin of the scheme.”

“Whoever came up with the idea is secondary,” Rufus said. “Finding Asano is the priority.”

“Well, I don’t have him, or know who does. All I can offer is some advice. If you look into Silva, don’t look to Silva himself. Look for what he’s been doing. Even he isn’t fool enough to take your friend without precautions. Find those precautions and you find your friend. Presuming Silva is the one that took him.”

Danielle and Humphrey Geller had come upon Lucian Lamprey as he was reading in the Magic Society library. He was in an open area full of comfortable reading chairs and didn't bother to get up from the one he was occupying. He put his book down on a side table and convivially waved at them to join him.

"You were very easy to find, Mr Lamprey" Danielle said, sitting down. Humphrey remained standing, next to her chair. "To the point of conspicuousness, in fact. One might almost think you were being fastidious about establishing an alibi."

"And exactly what dark deeds would I need an alibi, Lady Geller?"

"Jason Asano has gone missing."

"Oh? I suppose I can see why you would look at me, but I have to imagine I am but a single name on a very long list. He might have made allies out of powerful people like yourself, but he's annoyed even more. Taking opportunities that rightly belonged to Greenstone's nobility. A complete disregard for propriety, decorum and the inherent superiority of the aristocratic class. He's made enemies he's never even met."

"But you're the one who threatened him in public," Danielle said.

"That was just talk. I'd just lost out in court, and you can't deny he has both the ability and intent to get under people's skin. If I genuinely intended to have someone disposed of, then I would make it a point to be friendly, rather than threaten them. Even putting aside the warning, it helps avoid conversations like this one."

Danielle gave him a smile that didn't reach her eyes.

"I assume we can count on the full support of the Magic Society in finding him?"

"Naturally," Lamprey said. "I'll hand pick anyone involved in trying to find him and supervise everything personally. Of course, he does have that little issue with tracking, doesn't he? Such a shame."

Danielle stood back up.

"Mr Lamprey, if you did happen across someone involved in this situation – through sheer happenstance, for example – then you would be well served by convincing them to reconsider the whole enterprise."

"Oh, I couldn't agree more," Lamprey said. "With Bahadir and the Remores, it means dealing with gold rankers. That's something only someone as foolish as Asano would do."

Danielle levied a penetrating gaze on Lamprey, then turned to leave, Humphrey following after. Lamprey called out after them and they turned around.

"Do let me know if a body turns up. It will reopen legal proceedings regarding a young lady in dire need of some... strict guidance."

“The Adventure Society won’t let you touch her,” Humphrey said, face creased with anger. “And even if they did, I wouldn’t.”

“The yapping of a dog, hiding under its owner’s skirts,” Lamprey said dismissively. “Have you taken a liking to my thief, little doggy?”

“I’d never let you take her as an indentured servant,” Humphrey said. “I wouldn’t let you take anyone.”

“No?” Lamprey asked. “I didn’t see you in court last year when I claimed my previous one.”

He shook his head sadly.

“Poor girl. So pretty, but she went mysteriously missing, too. Of course, she didn’t have the heroic Geller clan rushing to her rescue. Do you only help poor people when Asano tells you to? I do hope he’s alright or you’ll have to go back to protecting heiresses.”

Danielle placed a hand on Humphrey’s shoulder, silencing the reply he was about to spit out.

“You should be careful, Lamprey,” she said. “Mysterious disappearances seem to be going around.”

“Are you threatening me, Lady Geller?”

Danielle strode back across the room, Lamprey standing up to meet her. The tall, muscular elf towered over the small woman but she radiated threat like a sword. The clash of their auras drew looks from the few library patrons not already surreptitiously watching the confrontation between the Director of the Magic Society and the City’s most famous adventurer. Their auras pushed against one another, Lamprey’s yielding under the flawless, unflinching power and control of Danielle’s.

“Lamprey, if Asano is dead and I find out you’re involved, I’m going to carve you up for chum on the steps of the Adventure Society, for everyone to see, and then use you to go shark fishing. That was me threatening you.”

Belinda made her way down an alley in Old City, stopping in front of an unmarked door and knocking twice. A panel on the door slid across, revealing a pair of eyes that went wide on recognising Belinda.

“Is she in?” Belinda asked.

“You shouldn’t be here,” the woman behind the door said. “There’s all kinds of stories going around about you and Wexler.”

“The reality is crazier than the stories, I promise.”

“Just go, Belinda.”

Belinda projected her aura through the door, suppressing that of the woman behind it.

"I'm going through that door," Belinda said. "It'll go better for both of us if you open it first."

"Let her in," came another voice from inside. It was the rich, deep voice of an older woman. The door opened, the woman behind it watching Belinda warily as she went past. The older woman had a broad, mannish body and curly hair down to her shoulders. She was in her early fifties, but fit and strong.

"Hello, Marg," Belinda greeted.

"Lindy," Marg said warmly. "Please, come up."

She led Belinda up some stairs and onto the flat roof, where picnic furniture had been set up on a rug. Marg waved Belinda to a chair, taking another for herself.

"You know, Lindy, we really have been hearing some strange stories. I even heard you were an adventurer, now."

"Not yet," Belinda said. "Sophie is. I have the essences but put off the field assessment while we went on a monster safari."

"You have essences?"

Belinda shape shifted, becoming a duplicate of Marg.

"Now that's something we could get some use out of," Marg said. "I don't suppose I can talk you into taking a job?"

"Sorry, Marg. It's the straight and narrow for me."

"That's a shame. What brings you here, then?"

"A man has gone missing. Sophie and I are looking into whether one of the Big Three are behind it."

"You think they are?"

"It's possible. He's annoyed them all in one way or another, largely in the process of helping me and Sophie. So, we owe him."

"Jason Asano," Marg said.

"You've heard of him?"

"His name started floating around when he was working at the Broadstreet Clinic. I hear you've been spending some time there yourself."

Belinda blushed.

"Can you find out about Asano for me?" she asked.

"I can ask around," Marg said. "How urgent is this?"

"I really would have gone through your door."

"That door is stronger than it looks."

"I know," Belinda said. "I put it there, remember."

"So you did. Any place I should start?"

"Adris Dorgan is too smart and has too much to lose, so it's unlikely to be him.

Ventress has the least reason to be annoyed at him, almost certainly not enough for this."

"Ventress is dead," Marg said.

"Dead?"

"No one knows how long, but word got out around a week ago. That bodyguard of hers, Darnell stepped in."

"That won't last," Belinda said. "He's not a flexible thinker."

"Focus on Silva, then?" Marg asked.

"If it's one of them, it's almost certainly him," Belinda said. "With Jason's friends, Cole is the only one stupid enough to try something."

"What is Wexler doing, if you're here?"

"We already figured that if it was any of the Big Three, it was Cole," Belinda said.

"Sophie is taking a more direct approach."

Sophie stepped over broken glass and unconscious bodies, looking for someone cognisant enough to interrogate. She followed the closest groan of pain, finding a hefty man slumped behind the bar with a broken bottle sticking out of his side. She easily hoisted him up on top the bar, causing him to yell out as the bottle shifted.

"As I was saying," Sophie said casually, "I want to know what Silva is up to at the moment."

"I haven't even met him," the man groaned. "I answer to a guy who answers to a guy who answers to a guy. No one tells me anything."

"Who does get told?"

"You know what Silva will do to you?"

Sophie gripped the bottle and twisted, eliciting a scream.

"The docklands!" he yelled. "There's a tavern in the docklands called Sailor's Rest."

"I know it," Wexler said. "There's a mist den operating out of the back."

"Silva has been expanding the mist trade in a big way since you got out," the man said. "The guy who runs it is the area boss for all the mist dens on that side of the city, now."

Crystal mist was a drug made from recording crystals, imbuing the contents into a powder that was dissolved into water, vaporised and inhaled. It would create a world inside the mind, based on the recordings.

Crystal mist was illegal, due to its deleterious affect on the brain. Over time, it caused a residue to build up that slowly but inexorably inflicted permanent damage. Even with magic, the damage couldn't be healed until the residue was purged. Since the residue was resistant to most forms of cleansing, that was an expensive, but not impossible prospect.

Cole Silva's father had maintained a small operation, catering to members of the nobility with low tastes. They had the money and connections to discreetly arrange the expensive cleansing required. Cole had massively expanded the operations, knowing there was never a shortage of disenfranchised people looking for an escape.

There was a pile of people in front of the door, so Sophie left by hopping lightly through the window and dropping down a storey to the ground. By the time the third person had gone through it, very little of the glass was left and she landed lightly amongst the shattered remnants of the window. The men she sent through it had staggered off already. She could see one of them helping the other down the street with an injured leg. She turned in the other direction, toward the docklands, and started running.

The ritual chant was long, sounding more like a sermon glorifying the Builder than the incantation for a ritual. As Killian continued, an aura started emitting from the star seed. It was faint but held an echo of vast power, like the light of a star. The metal frame fell away from the sphere as it rose into the air, its aura washing over Jason. His own aura was already suppressed entirely by the collar around his neck.

The tiny fragments that made up the sphere began separating, drifting up to slowly float through the air around Jason. They rose off the sphere like smoke from a fire until the seed was fully disassembled and the fragments floated around him like a cloud. Suddenly their movement stopped, as if they were frozen in time. The star seed's aura surged abruptly and the fragment darted in, burying themselves in Jason's flesh.

Chapter 208

Defiance

The pain of the tiny objects digging into his flesh was something Jason could endure well enough. In the last six months he had endured enough suffering, mental and physical that he could take the peppering of wounds in stride, even as he dangled, helpless, from the ceiling. Below him, the magic circle shone with a silver light.

“The star seed implantation process is not a swift one,” Killian said. “First, the seed will carve itself throughout your body, suborning your flesh in preparation for claiming your body as its own. The pain you are feeling now is simply a slow, easy start. It will grow over time, escalating until your mind can no longer endure it and breaks. But that will still only be the beginning. You will be broken again and again until there is nothing left of you and only the will of the Builder remains. The star seed is a door that will allow him to reach through and claim your soul.”

“And I’ll be here to watch,” Silva said gleefully. “You know the best part, though, Asano? Let me tell you the part that convinced me that this was the way to punish you.”

“The chance for monologuing?” Jason guessed, his voice only slightly strained. “You don’t need a star seed for that. You could have just explained your evil plot and then left, assuming everything would go as planned. That’s how they do it where I come from.”

“Go ahead and blabber, Asano.”

“Okay. You should seriously re-evaluate the ergonomics in here because I don’t think this is good for my shoulders.”

“Shut up!”

“Make up your mind, guy. You really need to...”

Jason was cut off by a stab of pain.

“Sorry, what was that, Asano?” Silva asked with a malevolent chuckle. “This is going to be very, very hard for you.”

Jason let out a pain-tinged chuckle of his own.

“That’s funny,” he groaned.

“What is?”

“I said the exact same thing to your mother last night.”

“Really, Asano? The pain must be getting to you if cheap jokes about my mother are the best you can manage. My mother died a dozen years ago; her ashes are interred in the family mausoleum.”

“That did take most of the fun out of it,” Jason admitted. “All I could really do was take the lid off the urn and waggle my thing in there.”

Silva’s face turned fury red and he moved to attack Jason, but stopped himself at the edge of the magic diagram.

“Please restrain yourself, Mr Silva,” Killian said. “Trust that the process will slowly bring him a level of suffering that no amount of bravado can endure.”

Silva relaxed and the evil grin returned to his face.

“You’re right, Killian,” he said. “You interrupted me, Asano, when I was about to explain the best part of this whole thing. You see, it turns out that a star seed can’t take you over. Not unless you let it.”

“The inviolable soul,” Killian said. “One of the most fundamental rules of magic.”

“So what the star seed does,” Silva continued, relishing every word, “is just keep ramping up the pain, until your mind can’t take it. Don’t think you will find relief in dark insensibility, though. After your body, it will come for your soul. There’s no hiding from that. It may not have a way to invade your soul, Asano, but it can hurt it. You’re going to suffer in ways you cannot imagine, but you won’t have to, because you’ll feel it. You can’t prevent it, avoid it or escape it. You will suffer and suffer until you can’t take any more and you give the Builder what he wants. You will open the door and let him in, allowing his will supplant yours, just so the pain will stop. You be nothing more than a vessel, a puppet. An empty husk, dancing on a string.”

Silva stepped up close to Jason, carefully stepping over the lines of the magic circle without disturbing them. He gripped Jason by the hair and spoke softly into his ear.

“I’m going to watch it all,” Silva whispered. “I’m going to taste your pain, revel in your suffering. The last thing you see, in the final moment before your soul is snuffed out, will be my face. The last thought you have will be the realisation that you have been completely, utterly and irrevocably broken, and that it happened because you took something that was mine.”

Jason didn’t respond, gritting his teeth against the pain, like icy-cold worms burrowing through his body. Silva ran his hand down the side of Jason’s face.

“And when we’re done, we’ll let you go,” he said. “Of course, it won’t really be you. I wonder what the Builder will have you do. Run off to the cultists? Perhaps you’ll go back to your friends and see how much damage you can do before they catch on that you aren’t home anymore. I would really like to hear that you killed Sophie. Would you do that for me? Make it ugly, too. Make her ugly. Let everyone know that what’s mine is mine, and no one else’s.”

“I don’t know if anyone’s told you this,” Jason forced out through gritted teeth, “but you’re kind of a prick.”

Jason felt the progress of the star seed as it invaded his body in the form of biting cold, like his veins were turning to ice. As the cold burrowed its way through his body, however, the trails it left behind started to warm again. Jason could feel Colin’s presence, working to reclaim his body from the star seed. As the star seed took hold over his body he realised that it felt very much like Colin’s dark mirror; cold and dead instead of warm and filled with vibrant life.

Colin’s attempts to reclaim Jason’s body didn’t help with the pain. Just the opposite, in fact, as the star seed and the familiar fought a war inside his body. Colin was not truly in Jason’s blood, however, but instead as a spirit form within Jason’s soul, anchored to the physical world through the blood. In most cases, the death of a summoner would cause the familiar spirit to return to the astral as it’s anchor was severed. If Jason’s soul was violated, however, Colin’s spirit would be made vulnerable. Jason didn’t know what that would mean for his familiar but he was confident that it was nothing good.

Jason knew Colin’s efforts were inevitably doomed as the star seed altered his flesh faster than Colin could restore it. In that moment, however, he felt an incredible warmth for the life-devouring apocalypse beast working so hard to help him. He was filled with fresh determination to fight on, to protect his familiar the way his familiar was protecting him.

Silva never seemed to tire of taunting Jason, but as the pain escalated, Jason was no longer hearing the words. All that he had was the pain, a world of white noise with no sense of place or time. When the pain abruptly receded and his senses started to return, he had no idea how long it had been.

“What happened?” Silva asked. Jason had visibly relaxed and the silver glow of the magic circle had significantly dimmed.

Killian frowned.

“The star seed is a magically hungry object,” Killian said. “It is a channel to the will of the Builder, an entity so powerful that if he were to directly come into contact with this world he would annihilate it. The purpose of the magic circle is to gather and concentrate the ambient magic to create a reservoir of power. When the seed becomes dormant, it’s replenishing itself by drawing on that reserve. That way, in spite of it’s heavy magical consumption, it can outlast anyone it is implanted in, no matter how great their endurance.”

“You’re only telling me about this now?”

“It shouldn’t have happened this quickly,” Killian said.

“Did you mess up the ritual?”

“If I failed to use the ritual correctly, the seed would not have become active in the first place.”

Killian turned a curious gaze on Jason.

“Something about Asano is hindering the seed’s work on his body, forcing it to work harder, consume its stores of power more quickly.”

Jason let out a pained laugh that turned into a choking cough, but he grinned madly at his captors, eyes still alive.

“Keep smiling,” Silva told him. “If you didn’t have spirit, what would the fun be in breaking it?”

The first reprieve lasted only a few minutes before the magic circle grew brighter and the pain resumed. Colin had used that time to try and reclaim territory but it wasn’t enough and Jason was only vaguely aware that the screams he heard were his own before returning to that white space of pain.

There were other brief spells of reprieve as the star seed exhausted itself against Jason and when dormant to replenish its power. To Jason, it felt like each break was shorter than the last. In truth, they were growing longer, but his increasing diminished capacities were no longer able to gauge it. Colin’s efforts were likewise becoming less effective; as Jason weakened, so did he.

“It’s taking longer and longer,” Silva complained. “The last time it was stopped for hours. How long will this one be?”

“Probably most of the night,” Killian said. “The magical density in this region is too low for the circle to collect magic efficiently. I suggest we take this time to rest. I had Remi set up some beds in the next room. We’ll know to come back when the screaming resumes.”

“I don’t want to miss him breaking,” Silva said.

“You won’t,” Killian said. “He is proving much more resistant than I anticipated. You’ll have all the time you need to enjoy his suffering.”

“I want to watch him break.”

“You will, Mr Silva. After the body comes the mind, and then the soul. What is the will of one man against a being greater than our entire world?”

“He’s just hanging there,” Silva said with disgust. “No screams, no writhing. He’s practically relaxed.”

“The star seed had claimed his body now,” Killian said. “We are approaching the end. Even his brain is no longer his own. Whatever remains of his consciousness will have taken final refuge in the bastion of his soul. Soon, he will yield and you shall see him break, just as you wished.”

The pain was gone, but Jason’s senses did not return. There was no sight, no sound, no touch. He was in a place of pure will, the border between his soul and the entity that sought to claim it. He felt adrift at sea, not one of water but of an immense will. A will too large for Jason to even conceive it’s totality. Greater than the sky, more vast than the sun. Older than the stars and more unfathomable than the deepest voids of space.

Before that will, Jason was naked and exposed. It was more than being weak and vulnerable. In the face of that unconscionable power, not only was it beyond what he was, but beyond anything he ever could be. Anything he could even conceive of. He was the smallest speck of creation in front of a force that transcended creation.

Oddly, it was not a wholly unfamiliar sensation. From the moment he had been cast adrift in a strange world full of power and danger, he had been surrounded by forces larger than himself. Time and again he had been brought to the brink, constantly under pressure. He had fought off death and stood defiant in the face of gods. Life in his new world was a fire, burning away everything he had believed himself to be and refining him down to what he truly was.

He could feel the desire for capitulation radiating from that the vast will. The pressure it exerted, pushing in on his soul. But he knew that pressure. He had endured it from the very start, as if every thing he encountered in this world was preparing him for this moment. Next to the alien mind of the Builder and its towering will, Jason was nothing. But he realised that even the transcendent being with all its power could not open the doors to his soul. So long as he had the will to defy it, the Builder could not claim him. He gathered his own will and threw it into the Builder’s own, a grain of sand in a hurricane.

“Is he... grinning?” Silva asked. “He’s grinning! How is... what... Killian! What is happening?”

“I have no idea,” Killian said. If Jason’s ears still belonged to him he would have recognised the same delighted tone Clive would get on encountering something completely unexpected.

The two men were startled when Jason spoke.

“Is that all you’ve got, mate? You’ll have to do better than that, you interdimensional asshole.”

Killian started laughing madly.

“You think this is funny?” Silva asked him.

“That shouldn’t be possible,” Killian said, awestruck. “That really, really shouldn’t be possible.”

In the wake of Jason’s outburst, the pressure of that vast will suddenly vanished. Like a becalmed sea, the absolute stillness carried an ominous sense of danger, isolation and helplessness. Most of all, it carried a silent threat; an anticipation of what would come when the weather inevitably turned.

Killian and Silva looked on as Jason once more hung limp and unmoving. Silva was increasingly agitated while Killian had gone from curious observation to avid fascination.

“We should kill him now,” Silva said. “I’ll do it.”

“You would be well advised not to take back what you have offered to the Builder,” Killian said. “We started this and have to see it through to the end or pay the price.”

“What kind of price?”

“The worst kind,” Killian said. “The price you don’t know until you pay it. But you don’t have to worry; a man cannot defy the will of a transcendent being.”

“And if you’re wrong?”

“Then that is the point we kill him, and make sure it’s done right,” Killian said. “A man who can defy that kind of power can do anything. That’s not a man you leave alive, not after what we’ve done him. But as I said, that simply isn’t possible.”

Silva opened his mouth to respond but stopped, both men turning to face the door. They both sensed the agitated aura of the guard, Remi, rapidly approach. His arrival was marked with a hammering knock.

“Mr Silva, Mr Laurent,” Remi’s voice came through. Remi, was in charge of watching over the site while Silva and Killian dealt with Jason, and he should not have left the security room unless something went wrong.

Silva and Killian went to the outer room and Killian opened the exterior door.

“What is it?” he demanded.

“We’ve been sleeping in shifts, in the security room,” Remi said. “I just woke up to find Coburn dead and Jerrick gone. I didn’t feel any aura surge from powers being used,

so he must have killed Coburn without using them. There was a stab wound in the back of Coburn's neck."

"How long ago?" Killian asked.

"I can't be sure," Remi said. "Hours, I don't know how many."

"It makes no sense," Silva said. "Why would he do that?"

"I don't know," Remi said. "I can only assume it is something to do with Jerrick's connection to Asano."

"Why?" Silva asked again. "If anything, he should want to get his own kicks in. Why kill Coburn and leave?"

"To give himself time to reach the city," Killian said, then sighed. "It's over."

"You don't know that," Silva said. "Why would Jerrick help Asano? It makes no sense."

Caught up in his own thoughts, still voicing questions out loud, Siva didn't notice the sudden change in Killian, although Remi did. Killian's normal, obsequious posture straightened, his creepy, pandering half-smile vanishing. Killian stood tall, pale face blank and expressionless, his eyes hard. Even his aura changed, becoming steely hard.

"Just because you lack the imagination doesn't mean there isn't a reason," Killian said to Silva. "He may be trying to regain admittance to the Adventure Society by helping the man who got him kicked out. He might have realised that we were using the Builder cult's star seed and balked. In the end, the reasons don't matter, only the result."

"Wait, what was that about the Builder cult?" Remi asked.

Killian glanced at Remi and a bone spike shot out of the ground, impaling the henchman. The power difference between a skilled and powerful bronze-ranker closing in on silver and a failed adventurer like Remi was made blindingly obvious as the henchman's corpse slid limply down the spike. Silva looked on in shock, realising that Killian was far stronger than he had ever let on.

"We are done," Killian said. "We're done here, we're done in Greenstone and we are done as a collaboration."

"What are you talking about?" Silva asked.

"Do you still not understand that this undertaking wasn't even risk?" Killian asked. "It was always going to go wrong. Your position in Greenstone is untenable, now. Asano's allies are too powerful, and I promise they are coming for you, even as we speak. It was always going to come to this."

"Then why did you go along with it?" Silva asked. "You arranged most of this."

“Because I have diverted enough resources from your operations over the past year to meet my needs going forward,” Killian said. “When Lamprey brought this idea to you it presented the perfect distraction to extricate myself from you and this city. While everyone is chasing after you for killing Asano, I can conclude my affairs and depart in peace. This is where we part ways, Mr Silva.”

Silva reeled at the betrayal of his most trusted follower.

“You’re turning against me?”

“Of course,” Killian said. “If anything, I’m amazed anyone is loyal to you at all. You’re completely oblivious to how much effort I had to expend on holding your organisation together, in spite of your best efforts.”

Silva lunged at Killian, only for more bones to erupt from the ground, spearing into Silva’s flesh and holding him in place. Silva grabbed two of the bones and started flexing them outwards, but while the bones gave a little, they held. Silva’s strength-enhancing power was in the early stages of bronze, no match for Killian’s conjuration power that had already reached silver.

“So pathetic,” Killian said. “You could put up more of a fight, if you knew how, but you don’t even understand your own powers. All those monster cores. Helpless victims instead of even the pretence of actual combat. You truly are a wretched thing, but I won’t kill you, Mr Silva. When you wake up, I suggest you don’t spare Asano the same mercy. If the Builder doesn’t have him by then, kill him and run. With Asano’s friends after you, you’ll be lucky to live long enough to pay the price of denying the Builder.”

Silva glared at Killian with frenzied eyes.

“And if they catch me and I set them on you?”

“Mr Silva, you don’t know a single thing about me. You don’t know who works for me, or what my holdings are. If you did, you’d wonder why so many of them had gone missing from your own months ago.”

“I’m going to kill you,” Silva snarled.

“Unlikely, but good luck,” Killian said. A skeletal arm burst through the pavers and started choking Silva. Silva tried to spit out more words but they came out as a choked-off gurgle. He tried to use his active powers but the bone cage had a suppression effect that prevented them from activating. His last thought before passing out was fury at a world that kept denying him the things that were his by right.

All that was left of Jason’s true self was hidden away in the fortress of his soul. His body stolen, he had no brain to drive his thoughts and was quickly reduced to little more

than that a last scrap of will, the innermost core of his being. Beyond the impregnable walls of his soul, the power of the Builder had undergone a change. If it could not cow Jason into capitulation, it would go back to inflicting pain until he yielded.

The Builder's will became a hurricane of knives, scoring marks across Jason's soul. It was a pain unlike anything the body could suffer, cutting not at flesh but at the very essence of his being. Jason endured, the warm presence of his familiar beside him. In his unthinking state he had a vague sense of things that were missing. He no longer remembered the familiars he had yet to resummon, yet he felt their absence.

It became worse, knives becoming drills trying to bore their way into his soul. Yet still, they failed. So long as Jason had the will to resist, they could not breach his soul. All they could do was bring pain that carried with it a promise. It could all stop, and all he had to do was give in.

The pain scoured away the echoes that were the remnants of what Jason had been when his body and mind were his own. All that remained was a meagre scrap of self, ragged and torn, yet still unyielding.

The days of torment since the star seed was implanted were a microcosm of every threat he had faced since arriving in his new world. Those memories were now gone but their effects were still felt. Those events had made him anew, reforging the very core of his being into something that would never stop struggling. Even against the indomitable will of an alien mind, with power beyond imagining. Even when there was nothing left of him but the will to struggle.

The Builder's will was unrelenting, sending pain into the reaches of Jason's soul it could otherwise not reach. into the fortress of Jason's soul. All that remained was a flickering ember, the last scrap of his true self. The alien mind strove to extinguish that final spark but it refused to die out.

After stripping everything else away, only one part of Jason remained. The one thing that had kept him going, every time he walked the line between life and death. That pushed him on in the face of monsters, cultists, cannibals and gods. The memories of those experiences were lost but the will they had formed was the one thing he had left. The unwillingness to bend, to conform, to capitulate. All that remained of Jason was pure, unadulterated defiance.

Jason could not out-endure the Builder, any more than a dandelion could withstand a tornado. But while the great astral being had no limits, the star seed connecting it to Jason did. The harder the Builder pushed Jason, the faster its power was consumed. Finally, the Builder's will faded as the seed went dormant, forced to stop and replenish itself.

In the aftermath of the storm, Jason's soul pulsed and throbbed, rattled by the forces that had besieged it. From deep within, something shifted, as if the alien power drilling into it had uncovered some vast power, buried and forgotten. Power built and built, pressure climbing like the inside of a volcano. The fading ember of Jason's will ignited into a furious flame and Jason's soul erupted, burning away at the icy clutches of the star seed that had claimed his body. Colin's spirit soared out, the familiar adding its own power as Jason will strove to reclaim the now undefended body.

The Builder's will returned, having sensed the danger to the star seed in Jason's resurgence. There was only a fragment of power left within the star seed and Jason felt a flicker of uncertainty in that ancient, alien mind. It had to stop Jason now before the star seed was fully overcome, impinging upon him with all the strength of its will.

The seed, already drained of all but the last skerrick of energy could not take the strain. The Builder's attempt to head Jason off before he could turn the tables on the seed had itself pushed the seed past its limits, ruining it for good.

The connection was gone and the Builder's will with it, the seed's power burned out, not to return. The physical remnants of the seed were still in Jason's body but they were inert, a spent force. The end of their power was not the end of their threat, however. Those physical remnants riddled Jason's body. Without the seed's power keeping him alive as it transformed him, the foreign matter running through his body was now killing him. If not for the strange nature of his outworlder body, he would have been dead already.

Even as his body failed, however, his soul reclaimed it. Jason's consciousness returned, only to fade away, unable to function.

Jason came to, still hanging from the ceiling. His body was wet with his own blood, leaking from rents in his flesh where the star seed fragments had been pushed back out of his body. Colin had somehow kept him alive through the laborious task of purging his body of the star seed, slowly restoring him to something resembling health. He could feel Colin, now dormant inside him. The familiar had given all that he had to keep Jason alive.

"You did good, buddy," Jason croaked. "You have yourself a good rest."

His body was ravaged, more weak and exhausted as he had ever thought possible. Yet somehow, he felt strong, stronger than he had ever been. He could feel his soul, sense it in a way that never could before. It was his true self, his last refuge, not the meat shell he'd been walking around in. Ever since finding out his body had been destroyed and remade from magic, he had a sense of unease about himself and his very existence. That

was gone, now, as he realised that the body he wore was ultimately no more important than a suit.

He craned his neck to look down at the fragments of start seed on the floor underneath him. The magic circle had turned to ash. He started laughing, hoarse and painful, but he kept on laughed like a madman.

“I don’t know if you can hear me through that your dead magic rectal probe,” Jason said, “but you need to listen up, you interdimensional land bandit. You just got beat by the assistant manager of an office supply retailer while he was hanging from a hook and naked as the day he was born. And reborn, I guess. So you’d best back up your piss weak little cult and take them back to your magic land in the sky because I’m coming for them. And this time, I’m going to have pants.”

Chapter 209

Hanging Around

“Where the hell are the bad guys?”

Still hanging from the ceiling, Jason remembered that his torture had come with torturers. They might have seemed inconsequential when he was facing off against the Builder but now that fight was over and he was still strung up like meat on a butcher’s hook.

Even if he wasn’t and if instead of the suppression collar he was wearing at least some underpants, both men were higher rank than him. At full strength, which he definitely wasn’t, he thought he could probably take Silva. The elf was a different matter.

The weird, pale elf had the kind of rigid aura control Jason associated with expert essence users, and he knew enough of them to judge. What someone with actual skill was doing working for Silva was a mystery.

The more Jason thought about it, the more odd the elf’s presence seemed. He claimed not to be part of the Builder cult, but he had known an awful lot about how the star seed worked. Jason was willing to bet that whatever the elf was up to, he was playing Silva for a fool. It might even be the reason the pair were in absentia.

Jason considered his options. At full strength he could probably pull out the hook the elf had hammered into the ceiling and free himself. He was strong and well-trained enough that he could hoist himself up and put his feet against the ceiling for leverage.

He was nowhere near full strength at the moment, however. His body was visibly emaciated under the coating of blood and pocked with small injuries. Jason could feel that inside him, Colin had gone dormant. The familiar had exhausted himself keeping Jason alive and purging the star seed remnants. The dead fragments had been pushed out of Jason’s body by Colin’s healing, piling up under Jason’s dangling feet. Far more than the mass that had been the original seed, there was almost a fifth of Jason’s body weight in metal, sticky with Jason’s blood.

“Good job, little mate.”

Jason could feel the sting of the remnant wounds all over his body. One was right above his left eye, which he had to force open through the sticky blood welding it shut. He could feel another just to the right of his chin, underneath a scratchy beard that had grown during the time of his captivity. Neither were drastic; like the other wounds they were the places the star seed had invaded his body, then pushed back out again. The real damage

had been wreaked on the inside of his body and the outside of his soul. The wounds were present all across his body, although his most tender parts had been mercifully spared.

The wounds weren't any particular threat to his wellbeing, but they variously stung or itched, which he could do nothing about in his current predicament. He laughed at the absurdity of a few itchy scratches annoying him after the ordeal he had been through, or even the situation he was now in.

Knowledge had once denied that Jason's mind had been altered when he became an outworlder to better process the kind of trauma he was suffered since. Now, considering his odd equanimity after days of literally soul-scourging torture, he was pretty sure she'd been lying. She had likewise skipped over the part about his outworlder body, which was probably for the best. At that point he hadn't been ready to hear it, still desperately clinging to any part of his old identity.

Jason considered his options. One, literally hang around and wait for rescue. His friends were capable and would find him eventually, but would it be before Silva and the elf came back? Option two was... still in the formulation stage. Too weak to move, too powerless to act.

His new awareness of his own soul brought with it a better sense of the pressure being placed on it by the suppression collar. It was like his soul had grown to touch the sides of that containment, like a balloon being inflated inside a box. He felt an intense compulsion to push his way out of that box

Could he? He was hardly in the best state right now and the collar was an oppressive power. It presented no pressure but had the feel of an inviolable boundary, yet he couldn't shake the desire to try. He pondered where that feeling was coming from.

Jason was certain that he had undergone significant changes as a result of overcoming the challenge of the star seed, but for the first time he was without a system message to explain it. Unlike other essence users, Jason had never been forced to fathom out his abilities by feel. There was an element of it, but he always had the system messages to guide and clarify. Was the desire to push back against the suppression just wish fulfilment or an instinctual understanding of an ability that had changed? Perhaps his astral affinity had evolved from the contact with a great astral being.

He decided to go for it, closing his eyes and feeling out the power within his soul. He was uncertain of how to actively use it. Following an instinct, he used the aura projection technique that Farrah had taught him as a foundation, projecting that power outward. The instinct proved itself true as he realised through his attempt that the true nature of his aura was a projection of his soul.

That first attempt was fumbling and inexpert, but armed with his new revelation, he tried again. Jason's aura was completely suppressed by the collar, but he could feel the strength within himself to push back against that confinement. His second attempt felt more refined and powerful than the first but it was like trying to push a boulder off his body. He strained, feeling a tantalising shift in the walls that bound his aura, but could not push them back. Eventually he could not maintain the exertion and was forced to take a pause.

He realised that continuing that way was not going to yield results. He needed to significantly improve the way he wielded the power. With the revelation that his aura and his soul were more intrinsically linked than he had previously thought, he needed to alter the way he used his aura.

Jason had always considered his aura control very strong, and others had told him as much. He thought of Rufus, and his realisation that people telling him how excellent he was had been stopping him from trying to get better. With his improved sense of his own soul and the new understanding of his aura, Jason realised that his aura use had been crude and inefficient. He needed to better incorporate the power of his soul into the way he used his aura.

The foundation that Farrah had helped him lay down was a solid basis in which to inject the core power of his soul that his conflict with the Builder had revealed. Once he mastered it, it would magnify his power and control over his aura by an untold amount. The suppression collar would be the crucible in which he remade his aura. Instead of just projecting it out into nothing, that suppressive force would be the press that concentrated his power, the whetstone on which he sharpened his control.

Previously, Jason had felt like his aura control was pushing the limit of what he was capable of, only the next rank offering a chance to substantially improve. As he forced his aura up against the suppression collar's power he realised how foolish and arrogant he had been. He was once again a fumbling amateur, taking him back to those first days, training with Farrah. He had crested a hill he thought was end of his journey, only to find a grand new vista before him.

There was a long new road ahead of him and he was not going to reach the end here and now, dangling on a hook. What he needed in his current situation was to push back the suppression collar's power, if only for a fleeting moment.

When he had been training Jason, Rufus had often repeated advice his family had hammered into him. This was especially true of his grandfather, the famous, diamond-rank sword master, Roland Remore. From what Rufus had passed on, Jason secretly suspected the Remore patriarch of spending his diamond-rank lifespan figuring out how to

sound as profound as possible. This world didn't have fortune cookies, so he had to find the rhythms himself.

When Jason first began his training, Rufus had talked a lot about his grandfather's ideas about the difference between a good adventurer and a great one. In the wake of Rufus' disastrous foray against the blood cultists, it was a distinction that he obsessed on. He became preoccupied with his failures, doubting his judgement, leadership and even qualifications as an adventurer. It was a pattern that had played out again with Farrah's death.

According to Rufus' grandfather, the difference between a good adventurer and a great one was a matter of moments. The right decision in the right moment was the difference between success and failure, between triumph and death. Great adventurers were alchemists of circumstance, turning opportunity into fortune. After how things played out with the blood cult, Rufus believed it was something Jason had an instinctual gift for.

Jason hoped Rufus was right as threw everything he had against the collar's containment, pushing his aura against it like shouldering a boulder. He pushed and strained until a final surge finally caused it to shift. He had bought himself a moment and now he had to use it.

System messages started erupting in Jason's face but he ignored them, opening his inventory next to his manacled hands and snatching out an item, barely getting it in hand before the suppression snapped back into place, pushing his aura back down. The system windows dissolved into static and vanished.

The backlash scraped against his very soul, something that would have made him pass out before his recent experiences. It did almost make him drop the small vial he now had in his hand and panic flashed through him. He convulsively clutched his fingers around the vial, almost breaking it with the panicked ferocity of his grip.

He once again hung limply from the manacles, panting for breath. Dangling from the ceiling made for a poor recovery position. As he regained his breath he looked up at the small vial. He had used his original lesser miracle potion fighting the giant water elemental, but Jory had joined them and replaced it before they had even gotten all the way through Old City.

He craned his neck, lining up his mouth up as best he could before thumbing the stopper off the vial. Some of the potion splashed onto his face but most went into his mouth and he poked his tongue out to lick up what he could of the rest.

The potion's effects were, as promised, miraculous. He felt the healing sting as emaciated muscle was replenished and the wounds all over his body finished healing.

Looking down at his chest, Jason saw that they had left behind a series of small scars. He knew those on his face had likely done the same.

His body was now flush with energy, the suppression collar having no impact on the magic of the potion, although Jason had no way to use his refilled mana pool. Instead, he went to work of expending some stamina, straining his arms to grip the chain of the manacles.

Jason's fighting style, the Way of the Reaper, was much more comprehensive than a simple martial art. It included mobility techniques, stealth and, immediately relevant, escape methodology. Jason pulled himself up, hand over hand, then shifted his weight to pivot his body, swinging his legs up until his feet were pressed into the ceiling.

The ring the manacles were looped through was held in place by a spike Jason had watch the elf fix it into place with conjured skeleton arms. It hadn't been a carefully bored hole, just a smooth, unthreaded spike that was hammered directly into the brickwork. Jason figured therefore that he could combine leverage, strength and body weight to yank it right out.

It was a task that proved easier to conceive of than to execute and Jason was left hanging upside down, reefing on the chain. He had been at it some time when the spike suddenly gave way and he fell to the floor in a heap.

He stood up, awkwardly reaching around with his manacled hands to brush off the fragments of inert star seed that stuck to his body when he landed. They had formed a pile underneath where he had been hanging and, like Jason, were sticky with Jason's blood. The remnants of the ritual circle was nothing but ash.

There was nothing else in the room and Jason wasted little time, making for the door. Passing through the outer room to the exterior of the building, he surveyed his surroundings. He quickly surmised he was somewhere on the outskirts of the delta, where the last patches of scrubland gave out and the dead sands took over. The layout of the buildings were similar to spirit coin exchange outposts he'd seen, although this one was obviously disused. Patches of yellow grass were growing up between pavers dislodged and uneven from time and weather.

To his surprise, Silva was out in the open, laying in a pool of his own blood. Jason's aura senses were not restricted alongside his aura, so he could sense that Silva was still alive. The same could not be said for another man Jason recognised as the guard who had given him a spirit coin while he was awaiting his fate. The man was definitively dead.

Jason checked on Silva. He had brutal strangulation marks on his neck and multiple stab wound in his arms, legs and torso. Silva had bled quite a lot but didn't seem to be in

any danger. His bronze rank recovery attribute would heal him faster than a normal person, although it hadn't woken him up in all the time Jason had been hanging in the building.

"Someone sure did a number on you," Jason said as he searched Silva's body. He found a small keychain in a jacket pocket, cheering as he found the key to his manacles and the the collar around his neck. The sensation of removing the collar was like taken that first breath after almost drowning; of finding a toilet just in time to avoid soiling yourself in the middle of a shopping centre.

Jason didn't waste more than a moment revelling as he felt his powers return. He minimised all the system messages flooding his vision and snapped the suppression collar around Silva's neck. Silva didn't react, remaining unconscious as Jason then placed the manacles on Silva's ankles.

"Now we'll see how you like being a prisoner," Jason told him. "No, that's no good. You'll have plenty of time for sleep in the slammer? That's worse, this is hard. Are eighties action movies not as good as I remember? Colin, when we get back to my world, I'm going to show you Gymkata. It's literally everything you need to know about western culture."

Jason resumed his search of Silva's person, finding that a pocket in the jacket led to a dimensional storage space. He emptied it out and stole everything that looked interesting or valuable, shoving it all into his inventory except for his missing amulet, which he immediately clasped around his neck.

It was time to get some clothes on but he was still covered in blood. He pulled out a bottle of crystal wash and tipped it over his head. It washed the blood off his body and out of his hair, including his new beard. There was no sign of his missing suit, so he summoned another from his inventory. The dark mist covered his modesty but at this point it didn't really matter. Even if Jason hadn't got used to the nudity, the only people here were either unconscious or dead.

Jason was tweaking his cufflinks when he froze, seeing movement in the distance. Three vehicles were careening over scrubby ground, a trio of skimmers rocketing towards him. As he watched, most of the figures on one of the skimmers vanished and he was suddenly surrounded by people. Danielle Geller had teleported Rufus, Gary and Humphrey from their skimmer directly next to him.

"Ah, you're here," Jason said, and finished adjusting his cufflink. "And here was me just needing a ride."

Jason's attempt at dignity was immediately smothered as Gary grasped him in a hug that was more like a rugby tackle.

Chapter 210

What Doesn't Kill You

The rest of Jason's team arrived in the three skimmers, with Clive driving one and a somewhat shaky Jory and Belinda driving the others, both for the first time. Everyone poured off the vehicles before they had even fully stopped, clamouring around Jason. He met their looks of concerns with easy confidence, assuring them that he was fine.

Clive had so many questions he didn't actually manage to get any of them out. Humphrey gripped Jason on the shoulder, giving him a beaming smile that the young women of Greenstone would sell out their own families to receive.

"We rush out here to rescue you," Belinda said, "and you're standing here like you're waiting for a ride to the damn symphony. Do have any idea how many people we kicked the hell out of looking for you."

"We?" Sophie asked.

"It was a team effort," Belinda said.

"Sophie took out two barrooms full of thugs, single-handed," Neil said. "One was full of criminals and the other was full of sailors."

"In fairness, there's a lot of crossover," Sophie said. "Are you really alright, Asano?"

"I had time to stop and pick you up a gift," Jason said. "It's a little damaged but I don't think you'll mind."

Everyone had been so fixated on Jason that they didn't even glance at the bodies on the ground. Jason walked over to the unconscious Silva and poked him with his foot.

"You got him," Sophie said.

"Yep," Jason said. "He's all yours."

"No," Danielle said. "He's all mine. I have questions Mr Silva there is going to find himself extremely compelled to answer."

"How did you end up kidnapping him?" Gary asked.

"It was an incredible fight," Jason said. "Pitting myself against a bronze-ranker, exhausted after my daring escape. Struggling back and forth until finally I clinched the hard-fought victory."

"He looks pretty fresh for having fought you," Neil said. "There isn't even any rot around the wounds."

"Yeah, I don't know what happened there," Jason said. "I found him like this."

"You found him like this?" Rufus asked.

"I should probably start at the beginning," Jason said.

Suddenly a bird swooped out of the sky, transforming into a puppy that slammed into his chest like an adorable bowling ball.

“Oh, hey mate,” Jason said, holding Stash in his arms and scratching him behind the ears. Humphrey took his familiar back with an admonishing look.

“You have to be more careful,” Humphrey scolded. “What if Jason was hurt? You don’t know what he’s been through.”

“Jason’s fine,” Neil said. After reaching bronze rank, Neil’s perception power, eyes of opportunity, allowed him to see the vulnerabilities of others. That included injuries, not just what they were but what the effects they had on the body. It was a powerful tool for a healer, letting him see the conditions of his team at a glance.

“It got a little rough, I won’t lie,” Jason said. “I chugged that miracle potion Jory gave me. Thanks for that one, Jory.”

“Maybe stop putting yourself in situations where you need them?” Jory said.

“Couldn’t agree more,” Jason said. “No more dashing heroics for this adventurer.”

“And here you just said you won’t lie,” Sophie told him.

Jason ran them through events as best he could remember them, but his memory was rather hazy. Even for the parts he was in control of his brain to form memories, the pain made his recollection rather sketchy. The most important events took place when he retreated into his soul, which he didn’t exactly remember. Instead, it was like his feelings of that time were imprinted on him. Fear, pain, power and defiance. It was difficult to put to words in any way that made sense.

Jason’s veneer of equanimity started to crack as he struggled to explain those moments and Danielle put a stop to it, setting the others to work securing the site.

With the sudden sense of safety, the door Jason had been pushing all the panic, horror and pain behind suddenly opened. His body shuddered, a chill passing over it. Danielle placed a concerned hand on his shoulder and could feel him trembling, even as his face maintained a carefree smile. His legs felt shaky and he pulled a chair from his inventory to sit down before he stumbled. He leaned back, tilting his head to the sky to feel the sun on his face.

The others threw frequent glances back at Jason as they went about their tasks. Rufus and Gary started searching the area, looking out for any sign of the missing elf Jason had described. Clive took the building where Jason had been tortured while Humphrey searched the second building with its reflective glass.

Neil and Jory started examining the unconscious Silva, while Sophie and Belinda concentrated on the dead man lying near him. Belinda found a small, fresh hole in the pavers and spotted more where Silva lay close by. Further examination revealed that the

holes were broken at the edges and tiny fragments were scattered around them. It looked like something thin and hard had broken through from below and Belinda looked from the holes in the ground to the stab wound in Silva's body.

"That elf Jason described," Belinda said to Sophie. "We're assuming Killian Laurent, right?"

"The description fits," Sophie said.

"Did I hear something about him conjuring bone spikes from the ground?"

"I think I've heard that," Sophie said.

"Who's Killian Laurent?" Jory asked from nearby.

"He's been hovering around the periphery of the Silva family for years," Belinda said. "Old Man Silva only kept him around because he was solid with ritual magic."

"There were also rumours that the old man used him to do the truly nasty stuff on the quiet," Sophie added. "The things that even criminals and murders would think twice about."

"Word is that Laurent rose up sharply after the old man died," Belinda said.

"Why would he do this to Silva?" Sophie wondered aloud. "It can't be a takeover. Silva was unpalatable but he had the family connections and at least some limits. No one would stand for that depraved elf being in charge."

"I imagine the answers will have to wait until this guy wakes up," Jory said, kneeling over Silva. The two women moved to stand over the man who was the genesis of so many of their misfortunes.

"We should kill him now," Belinda said. "It's not like anyone would care."

"No," Sophie said. "He can't suffer if he's dead."

"I won't allow you to just start hurting him," Neil said. "I'll remind you that I'm part of the church of the Healer."

"I wouldn't settle for physical pain," Sophie said. "That fades and I want him to suffer in ways that never end. I want him to see us and realise that chasing us has cost him everything."

"I think he was mostly chasing you," Belinda told her. "I'm pretty sure me, he could take or leave."

"If you want to hurt his feelings, go ahead" Neil said. "So long as you don't stab him or anything, that's your business."

Sophie looked over at Jason, then back down at Silva.

"What if I just kick him a little?"

Neil ignored that request, his eyes still panning over Silva's unconscious body. Jory, also assessing the damage, didn't have Neil's perception power. Instead, he relied on his knowledge and experience to make a physical examination.

"The strangulation, right?" Jory asked Neil.

"Yes," Neil concurred. "Whoever did it either came too close to killing him or didn't come close enough, depending on what they were after. There's damage to the brain that will take time to heal before he can wake up. He's bronze rank, though, so he'll fully recover, even without intervention."

Elsewhere, Rufus and Gary were sweeping the area, but other than the building the others were searching, there was very little to find.

"You don't buy this act of Jason's about being fine because he doesn't remember most of it, do you?" Gary asked quietly, glancing over to where Jason was slumped wearily on his chair.

"Of course not," Rufus said. "It was the same thing with the blood cultists. He was alright so long as things were still wild and dangerous, but once he was safe it all caught up with him. This time will be a lot worse."

"Did you feel his aura?"

"Yes," Rufus said gravely. "His aura power has definitely reached bronze."

"I think it might be stronger than mine," Gary said. "I know my aura control isn't the best, but that shouldn't affect the raw power and I'm almost silver rank. Even if his aura power is bronze, he's still iron. What do you have to do to a person's soul for that?"

"Hopefully, have them fight off a star seed," Rufus said.

"You think it actually took him over?"

"I'm hoping not."

"How do we help him?" Gary asked.

"First, we make sure it's really him in there. Then, we be there for him. Let him know he's safe and among friends. Beyond that, we leave it to my mother. She's good at helping people through things like this."

"You're right," Gary said.

Rufus' mother, Arabella, had made a reputation for herself by helping other adventurers through traumatic events that were an inevitable part of the job. It was only once she arrived to help her son in the wake of Farrah's death that Rufus was able to start truly moving past it.

Humphrey searched through the security building. Along with Jason's missing suit he found another dead body, with a stab wound in the back of the neck. He knew this was

likely Coburn, the man Jerrick had killed in order to sneak back to the city and give them Jason's location.

Only Clive was excited by what he found. In the makeshift ritual room where Jason had been tortured he found the ashen remains of the ritual circle and the inert remnants of the star seed. After making a record of everything with a recording crystal, he started pulling out special sample boxes, collecting ash and sealing away the star seed fragments.

Back outside, Danielle looked with concern at Jason, slumped in the chair.

"I don't like that I have to tell you this," Danielle said, "but after what you told us..."

"You have to assume that I've been compromised by the Builder," Jason finished for her. "I know."

"The church of the Healer has taken over from Purity in dealing with the star seeds," Danielle said. "Healer provided his people with the rituals they needed."

"Good," Jason said. "If you tried to turn me over the Purists, I would not go quietly,"

"I'm glad," Danielle said. "I'm starting to realise that not going quietly is kind of your thing."

Jason looked up from and they shared a smile, hers as motherly as his was weary.

Once the group made sure there were no surprises left behind at the site, Danielle gathered everyone to teleport back to Greenstone.

"What about the skimmers?" Clive asked. "I can't just leave the Magic Society's vehicles here."

"Yes you can," Danielle said. "I'll make sure it's smoothed over. Once the Adventure Society hears about what happened here, they'll be crawling over this place, and roping Magic Society people in with them. They'll bring them back."

Danielle's teleportation power was unable to affect others without their consent, so Jory fed Silva a potion to wake him up. He opened bleary eyes to find he had been sat in Jason's chair with Jason and Sophie looking down at him.

"Good morning, sunshine," Jason said. "You're about to have a rough day, mate."

Silva's eye went wide. He tried to leap out of the chair, only for Gary's huge hands to land on his shoulders and push him back down. Silva was strong but Gary was stronger.

"Asano!" Silva snarled. "Wexler? What happened? How are you not a meat puppet?"

"Rugged good looks," Jason said. "What happened to you creepy elf mate?"

The fury continued to burn in Silva's eyes but he pulled himself under control.

"You have to go after him. This was all his idea. I had no idea he was going to use a star seed."

“Mate, your words won’t be as garbled if you stop talking out your arse. You can lie all you like once we get back to town. Just shut up and accept the teleport.”

“Teleport?”

Silva looked around, noticing the others.

“Why would I go along with you?”

“Because if you don’t”, Sophie said, her voice an icy needle, “then you get to say here with me.”

Silva paled, then angrily covered the flash of fear.

“You’re nothing, Wexler. If it wasn’t for my father I’d have used you up and then tossed you into a brothel. If you were even still alive at this point, you’d be drugged to the eyeballs, laying in a filthy bed, waiting for the next guy to take his turn.”

Sophie leaned forward, bring her face right up to Silva’s, her mouth a hungry smile and her eyes, silver daggers.

“Oh, I know,” she said. “That’s why I’m hoping you make me take you back to town the long way. The very, very long way.”

Jason was finally home, alone in his room in the cloud boathouse. With a thought, dark mist swirled around him and all his clothing but his underwear vanished. He staggered over and fell into the cool embrace of his cloud bed. As the softness enveloped him, all the things he had been holding back were fully unleashed. Everything he had pushed away since his capture flooded over him in full force. Leaving him shuddering, curled up in a foetal position. The exhaustion not of his body but of his soul finally caught up with him and plunged him into a restless slumber.

He was woken by morning light coming through the transparent ceiling he hadn’t turned opaque before falling asleep. He was still shaky but somewhat purged, his reaction of the day before having worked something out of his system. He reconsidered that perhaps Knowledge hadn’t been lying after all. He was better than the day before, but that wasn’t the same as good. His experiences of the last few days were a blurry mess, yet he knew they would haunt him for the rest of his life.

When his team brought him home, Danielle had suggested he remain there with an Adventure Society official to watch over him, if only for the sake of propriety. She knew he wasn’t likely to want to leave anyway, and it was only until the church of the Healer gave him a thorough examination.

“Just until we confirm you’re all clear of the star seed,” she had told him.

The team gathered together on the deck for a big breakfast cooked by Gary, which meant meat, more meat and some eggs. With meat.

Jason had his first genuine smile in what felt like forever as he looked around at everyone happily tucking into breakfast. He was struck with the feeling that he might, eventually, be okay. The team naturally coddled him but he begged off after breakfast, asking for some time alone. He went up to the top deck of the houseboat, staying outside where the Adventure Society official could see him. He wasn't going to give the stranger access to the internal areas of his houseboat.

It was a mild winter day, actually rather pleasant with clear blue skies. With a mental command a cloud-stuff lounge rose up out of the floor. He lay down, and used the wrist razor Gilbert had incorporated into all his outfits to slash the back of his hand, letting a single member of team Colin to emerge. Colin crawled up Jason's arm to rest on his shoulder.

"Feeling better, little mate? How about we take a look to see if you got any stronger from all that?"

Jason looked at the system messages, still minimised at the corner of his vision. Taking a deep breath, he started pulling them up, one by one. Many of them were just warnings about his powers being suppressed, which wasn't much use given he couldn't see them until his abilities were unsuppressed again. Others were more important.

-
- **Outworlder racial ability [Quest System] has evolved to [Defiant].**

Ability: [Defiant]

- **Transfigured from [Outworlder] ability [Quest System].**
- **Previous effects of racial ability [Quest System] have been lost.**
- **Ignore the enhanced resistances derived from rank disparity. This only affects the enhanced resistance from being higher rank, not other sources of resistance.**
- **Ignore the enhanced aura suppression and aura suppression resistance derived from rank disparity. This only affects the enhanced effects from being higher rank, not the inherently superior strength of higher-rank auras.**
- **Looting abilities used on higher-rank monsters defeated by you will have increased effect.**

"Wait, no more quests? I have a lot of overhead costs coming up when I hit bronze."

The vast majority of the quests Jason had done were simple ones related to his Adventure Society work, earning him a nice bundle of money. As for the more exceptional quests, they had been the source of some of Jason's most important items. His essences, if nothing else. It looked like that part, at least, would still be a factor, with the new version enhancing the loot of more powerful monsters.

The quest system was Jason's variant on the guidance power that all outworlders apparently received. If the quests went away, did it mean he was no longer in need of guidance? Had this world truly become home? He suddenly felt further from his own world than ever.

Jason sorted through the system messages for the relevant ones. Some of them were just garbled nonsense, he guessed due to a combination of the suppression collar and the extreme stress being exerted on his soul, the source of all his powers.

He dug out another relevant message.

"Hey, this one's about you."

-
- Ability [Sanguine Horror] (Blood) has reached Iron 8 (100%).
 - Ability [Sanguine Horror] (Blood) has reached Iron 9 (00%).
 - Ability [Sanguine Horror] (Blood) has reached Iron 9 (100%).
 - Ability [Sanguine Horror] (Blood) has reached Bronze 0 (00%).

 - Ability [Sanguine Horror] (Blood) has gained a new effect.

Ability: [Sanguine Horror] (Blood)

- Familiar (ritual, summon).
- Base cost: Extreme mana, extreme stamina, extreme health.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Summon a sanguine horror to serve as a familiar.
- Effect (bronze): Summon a bronze rank vessel for your familiar with enhanced abilities.

- Ability [Sanguine Horror] (Blood) cannot advance further until all attributes have reached bronze rank.

"Look at you, mate, jumping all the way to bronze rank like a big boy."

Colin wiggled happily.

"Good thing I already picked up the materials for your next summoning ritual. I might have to brush up on the ritual knowledge, though, to make sure I do it right."

Jason pulled up another advancement message.

-
- Ability [Hegemony] (Sin) has reached Iron 9 (100%).
 - Ability [Hegemony] (Sin) has reached Bronze 0 (00%).
 - Ability [Hegemony] (Sin) has gained a new effect.

Ability: [Hegemony] (Sin)

- Aura (ritual, summon).
- Base cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.
- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): Allies within the aura have increased resistance to afflictions, while enemies within the aura have their resistance to afflictions reduced. Enemy resistances are further reduced for each instance of [Sin] they are suffering from.
- Effect (bronze): Inflicts an instance of [Sin] on enemies that make physical or magical attacks against allies within the aura. Instances applied in this way cannot be resisted.
- Ability [Hegemony] (Sin) cannot advance further until all attributes have reached bronze rank.

“Strewth, that’s a fair dinkum upgrade.”

Sin was Jason’s power that increased the effect of necrotic damage, and now any enemy attacking his team would stack up instances on themselves. That would combine nicely not just with his own powers but the abilities that Belinda and Neil had gotten from the awakening stones of the Reaper.

There was one more important system message before Jason cleared off the stack.

New Title: [Spirit Warrior]

- Fighting off a concerted attack on your soul by a transcendent entity has awakened your awareness of your own soul and refined your ability to use it as a weapon.
 - The suppressive force and resistance to suppression of your aura is increased. You can use the suppression resistance of your aura to resist forms of magical suppression beyond just aura suppression.
 - After fully suppressing the aura of others, you may use your aura to attack their soul directly.
 - Your aura signature has changed. Your unyielding nature in the face of even the greatest power can be detected if your aura is examined by an aura sensing power or when projecting your aura. The echo of transcendent power within your aura is increased.
-

Jason sat looking at the description for a long time. His recollection of the Builder's attack on his soul wasn't a memory exactly. It was more like something imprinted on his soul, deeper and more enduring. His own attacks would doubtless be an empty echo of what the builder had done to him, but it still wasn't something he wanted to do to another person.

"It's good," he told himself, unconvincingly. "Of course it's good."

He couldn't shake the questions rising up in the back of his mind. Exactly who and what were his experiences turning him into? He was already no longer human. When he finally found his way home, would anyone even recognise whatever it was he had become?

Chapter 211

Lingering Doubts

A group of people made their way along to the marina toward the houseboat. It was led by Danielle Geller, along with Rufus, his mother, Arabelle, plus Clive and Vincent Trenslow, the Adventure Society official with the grandiose moustache. With them was a gold rank priest from the church of the Healer, freshly portalled into the city.

“How is he?” Danielle asked. It had been a little more than a week since Jason had been returned home.

“He was asleep for four days,” Clive said. “Those miracle potions of Jory’s defer the need for healing recovery, which is impressive, but once it hit him, it hit him hard.”

“Unsurprising,” the priest of the Healer said. His name was Carlos, a broad-shouldered and swarthy man. His features had the polished perfection that was universal at gold rank. His clothes were not the robes of the healer but a casual outfit. The brown colour and plain cut was reminiscent of the church of the Healer’s humble clerical wear, however. Only once they had lost their way did the Healer’s local clergy move into ostentatious variations.

“Even in the case of cultists who are accepting of it,” Carlos continued, “introducing a star seed to the body is deeply traumatic. Removing it is even worse.”

“I saw a star seed removed before it was rendered inert,” Danielle said. “It wasn’t traumatic, it was a meat grinder.”

“Sadly true,” Carlos said. “people were lost all over before we figured out who the cult were and what they were doing. From what you’ve told me about the situation here, you seemed to figure things out before the Adventure and Magic Societies started disseminating the information widely.”

“Clive here is largely responsible for that,” Danielle, making Clive look sheepish.

“While we may have a better idea of what we’re doing,” Carlos said, “we aren’t always successful in helping the people the cult has implanted. Even when they’re inert, extricating star seeds can be lethal without continuous healing. If your friend really managed it on his own, with a suppression collar around his neck, that’s deeply impressive. What has he been doing since he woke up?” Carlos asked.

“He’s been under self-imposed house arrest, at my suggestion,” Danielle said.

“He’s been on the roof deck of the houseboat for days,” Rufus said. “He got up, had breakfast and went up there three days ago. I don’t think he’s come back down since. He’s just been up there, meditating the whole time.”

“It’s very likely that he’s aura training,” Carlos said. “In cases of soul trauma, practising aura control can help re-establish the sense of self. Many people realise this instinctively, while others we strongly suggest it to. Actually having the training beforehand is obviously a tremendous help.”

They arrived at the houseboat, Vincent telling the Adventure Society official stationed on the dock that he could go. One way or another, Jason would no longer be under confinement.

“He must be inside,” Danielle said. “I don’t sense his aura at all.”

“He’s up top,” Rufus’ mother, Arabelle, said. She tilted her head, as if straining to hear something, then frowned.

“His aura isn’t retracted,” she said. “It’s suppressed.”

Using her gold-rank strength, she vaulted directly up to the roof of the houseboat, Danielle had the others all touch and teleported them up. They found Jason sitting peacefully, in a cross-legged meditation pose with a suppression collar around his neck. He opened his eyes as they arrived on his rooftop.

“Jason,” Clive said. “What are you doing with that collar?”

This close, they could all feel the suppressive power of the collar with their own aura senses. They were all startled as Jason’s aura emerged from within it, pushing it back. He took a key from his storage space, unlocking the collar and putting it and the collar away.

“Aura training,” Jason said, pushing himself lightly to his feet.

“Fascinating,” Carlos said. “The ability to counter the magic suppression with aura is a phenomenon that I’ve heard of, but never actually thought I’d see.”

“I didn’t know that something like that was even possible,” Rufus said.

“Extreme soul trauma can prompt some unusual reactions,” Carlos said. “From time to time, some unscrupulous researcher will attempt to study it. They’ll take essence users and subject them to all manner of soul torture to try and figure out a process by which to reliably gain special soul effects. The cost in misery and lives unconscionable. It’s all for nothing, as well, because the research never goes anywhere. The most anyone had ever achieved was a few people with enhanced resistance to aura suppression and a lot of people who died in agony.”

“I’ve heard of instances like that,” Clive said.

“Soul trauma is actually my speciality field of healing,” Carlos said. “I’ve seen more victims of these atrocities than anyone and I’ve come to my own conclusion. The soul withstanding the trauma and growing isn’t about the process, but the person.”

“Don’t I feel special,” Jason said flatly. “Do you have a name, soul trauma expert?”

“Sorry, I’m being rude. Carlos Quilido, church of the Healer.”

Jason looked at him coldly.

“You’re here to decide my fate?”

“I’m here to help you,” Carlos said showing no signs of being affected by Jason’s rudeness. “If you truly don’t have a star seed in you, I’m here to prove that definitively and excise any lingering doubts. If you do have one inside you, I’m here to excise that.”

Jason frowned, unhappily.

“You’re right, I’m sorry,” he said. “It’s just that I’ve been awaiting judgement for days.”

“I completely understand,” Carlos said. “I have some experience with people in similar circumstances to yours. Because of my specialty, the church and the Adventure Society have had me travelling around to work with people who’ve had star seeds extracted from them. For the most part, the cult only implants their own members. Just as has been the case here, though, they will implant them within others when it serves their purposes. The church of Purity first developed the extraction techniques, but we, under the Healer, have taken over that task.”

“I’ve never understood why they would do that,” Rufus said.

“Because the best way to hide a secret alliance is under the guise of an enemy,” Jason said.

“Exactly,” Danielle agreed. “The implanting of star seeds in non-members of the cult has always been a distraction from their actual goals. That is as true everywhere else as it was here.”

“I have a question about the people who were implanted and had them removed,” Jason said to Carlos. “It sounds like you might have the answer, if you don’t mind.”

“Certainly,” Carlos said.

“The people who implanted me,” Jason said. “They told me that once you let the seed into the soul, the Builder has you. For good. That once you open that door, you’re done. It makes me wonder about the people who have had the seeds extracted.”

“My understanding is that it was not the cult that implanted you. It sounds like whoever these people were, their information about the star seeds was not complete. It is true that the Builder imprints itself on the soul of those who relinquish access. Without the star seed as a channel, however, the builder cannot exert control. As best we can understand, the people in question do truly regain themselves, although obviously very changed for the experience. Not to cheapen your experiences, but they were changed far more than you.”

“I can imagine,” Jason said. “I feel like a different person and my soul wasn’t breached. If I’d opened that door...”

“Quite,” Carlos said. “There is a rather disturbing trend we have discovered of people previously implanted feeling a compulsion left behind by the Builder.”

“What kind of compulsion?” Jason asked.

“To seek out another star seed. There seems to be a longing for the power it promised. Most resist that urge, knowing how self-destructive it is. Some of the people, frankly speaking, the weak-willed ones, give in to that urge. We have them all watched now, including the ones here in Greenstone. I understand one local was lost before that protocol was put in place.”

“It’s unconfirmed,” Danielle said, “but yes. The son of a friend.”

“It’s strange feeling sorry for Thadwick,” Jason said. “So, you’re some kind of big deal, Mr Quilido?”

“I wouldn’t say that, and please call me Carlos. I just happen to have a useful speciality for these unfortunate times. Arabelle and I have worked together in the past and she contacted me after what happened to you.”

Jason shared an apologetic smile between Carlos and Arabelle.

“You came all this way to help, and I was rude to you from the moment we met.”

“Seriously?” Clive asked. “All this time, and you apologise to this guy?”

“Don’t mind Clive,” Jason said. “He’s been crabby since I slept with his wife.”

“I don’t have a wife!”

“Yeah, I’m a homewrecker,” Jason said winsomely, turning to look off into the middle distance. “When you’re down with O.P.P. that’s the life you live.”

“What are you even looking at?” Clive asked.

“Am I missing something?” Carlos asked.

“You’ll get used to that,” Rufus said. “I think we just found out that it’s the real Jason in there,” Rufus said. “What is it that Humphrey says?”

“If you don’t understand what Jason is talking about, he’s probably up to something,” Clive said. “If you do know what Jason’s talking about, he’s definitely up to something.”

“Returning to normal behaviour is a good sign,” Carlos said. “Whatever normal behaviour means. In most cases of seed implantation, behaviour begins normally and diverges over the next few days and weeks. If the seed was resisted, we would expect to see behaviour consistent with trauma that returns to normal patterns over time. There will be permanent changes, though. Soul damage is something that marks you forever.”

“We would expect to see?” Jason said, echoing Carlos’ words. “Surely I’m not the only one to resist a seed implantation.”

“No,” Carlos said. “We know of at least six instances, but there are doubtless more. Under normal circumstances, star seeds of the Builder are implanted by cultists of the

Builder. If a seed is rejected, it generally kills the person. If they survive, the cult kills them. The unusual circumstances of your implantation have allowed you to escape without the cult killing you. I am curious how you purged the seed from your body and survived.”

“My familiar,” Jason said. “He heals me. He worked like a trooper to keep me alive.”

“I would be fascinated to examine it.”

Jason’s face froze.

“You can prod and poke me all you like,” he said in a voice of cold, hard granite. “You come after my familiar, though, and I don’t care who sent you or what rank you are. I will find a way to kill you.”

The temperature dropped as everyone fell silent at Jason’s sudden turn. The group looked nervous at the revelation that Jason’s return to his old self was a constructed façade. Rufus thought back to Jason’s first days in the city, where his vulnerability was likewise hidden behind his over-the-top personality.

Only Carlos seemed unfazed by Jason’s outburst.

“Understood,” he said. “I will take you up on that prodding and poking, though. There’s a reason the church and Adventure Society so readily approved Arabelle’s request to have me portalled here. Your survival presents a unique opportunity to learn more about the star seed implantation process. Hidden within your body and experiences may be insight that lets us help others. Mr Asano, you are the only known instance of someone both surviving the rejection and the aftermath. The hope is that what we can improve the process by which we extract star seeds from the cult’s victims.”

“I’m sorry,” Jason said. “You have larger concerns than just me, I know.”

“You don’t need to apologise to anyone for what you went through,” Carlos said. “But you are right about larger concerns. In many respects, the Builder has orchestrated a war on our world that we didn’t even know about until it was in full swing. Anything we can learn to catch up is essential knowledge.”

“I’m not sure how much I can help you,” Jason said.

“Anything we can find out will obviously be excellent,” Carlos said with an open smile. “First and foremost, though I am a priest of the Healer. Before anything else, I’m here to help you, not for you to help me.”

Chapter 212

Scars

Carlos worked with Clive, directing Clive to draw out a ritual circle on the rooftop.

“This is a damage echo ritual,” Carlos explained. “It will let me examine the history of physical damage to Mr Asano’s body.”

As Jason stood the middle of the circle, a man-shaped image of light appeared above him, with red and blue lines running through it like veins. Carlos waved his hand, manipulating the image. The mark of Jason’s first scar appeared, bright and glaring across his torso. Carlos slowly and methodically went through everything, although much of the image was an abstraction, incomprehensible without the appropriate knowledge.

“This is actually rather easy,” Carlos observed as he worked. “Because your body is less than a year old, everything is quite clear. Excellent for obtaining definitive results.”

Eventually he ended the ritual.

“This is consistent from what we’ve seen in others we believe to have rejected the seeds,” Carlos said. “They were all dead, though, so we were working from corpses. The information we have isn’t ideal.”

“You said there had been six that you knew of?” Clive asked.

“Those are just the ones we found,” Carlos said. “We don’t know what the actual numbers are. Obviously, it requires a series of ameliorating factors to even give someone a chance. As to how many more individuals resisted the star seeds and were killed without being found we just don’t know.”

“How accurately can you determine my condition if corpses are your basis for comparison?” Jason asked.

“Even from the corpses we could find specific differences between those who rejected the seed and those who were forced to accept it and then had it removed. If you think of the body as a field, the seed ploughs that field over, ready for planting. If the field accepts the seed, we see changes as the seed takes root. If the seed is rejected, however, all we get is overturned earth. The ground has been torn up but the seed won’t grow.”

“So, he’s in the clear?” Rufus asked. “No star seed?”

Vincent, standing next to Rufus could sense his agitation. He slipped his hand into Rufus’ and gave it a reassuring squeeze. Rufus gave him a grateful glance.

“Provisionally, I am willing to say that indications are good. Because Mr Asano’s body is young enough, the results are unambiguous. The Adventure Society and my church, however, require me to also conduct an examination of your soul, Mr Asano.”

“If you’re going to have a rummage in my soul,” Jason said, “we should probably be on a first name basis.”

“The soul examination isn’t invasive,” Carlos said. “It can’t be. If the Builder can’t get in there, I certainly can’t. It will expose your soul to scrutiny, however, which I have found makes people feel very exposed. The feeling is something like having your aura completely suppressed. I can tell you this from experience, having had the same ritual performed on me.”

“We could have used that ritual a few months ago,” Danielle said.

“It’s a gold rank ritual,” Carlos said. “Not easy to disseminate or use, especially in a place like Greenstone. Also, this version of the ritual is new, devised specifically for this circumstance. I had myself be the first person put through it, to experience what others would be going through, but you are our first actual living subject, Jason. The next ritual will create a projection of your soul that I can examine to confirm that it has not been breached. The sensation is something like projecting your aura, except there will be a powerful flood of energy to make the projection much more powerful than normal.”

“That’s a reliable test?” Rufus asked.

“Very,” Carlos said. “If Mr Asano – Jason – has ever let anything alien into his soul, it will be very evident. This ritual is only now being spread by the Magic Society to test for suspected star seed recipients. Fortunately, the Builder takes time to overcome the sense of self-preservation when he forces unwilling victims to open up their souls. Only those who have been seeded for extended periods are willing to detonate themselves when captured.”

“If he does have a star seed in him,” Danielle asked, “will this ritual harm Jason before we can have it extracted?”

“No. It will just be a projection of the soul, nothing more. But as I said, it’s a profoundly uncomfortable experience. The sense of exposure, of vulnerability, is very real.”

“Not an issue,” Jason said.

“That’s easy to say,” Carlos said. “What the ritual reveals won’t just be visible, although that will be part of it. Anyone with aura senses will be able to sense your fully exposed soul. This is especially true because the ritual incorporates an amplification element. Jason, your soul is only iron rank and I need to examine it clearly, so the projection will be more powerful than your normal aura projection. For that reason, I suggest we move to an enclosed ritual room instead of a high, open space on a busy marina.”

“No,” Jason said, his voice almost a growl. “I want people to see.”

His friends looked at him with concern but remained silent.

“Let’s get started then,” Carlos said.

Clive used his powers to rebalance the ambient magic and start drawing out the ritual circle from a book Carlos handed him.

“The visible representation will be quite noticeable,” Carlos explained as he supervised Clive’s work. “Particularly given our choice of venue. The appearance will be rather similar to your personal crest, if you have one. I do not, so I was rather curious when I underwent this ritual myself. My soul, as it turns out, looks like a sparkly apple. Presumably because I’m sweet and fresh.”

Jason chuckled as his friends looked on awkwardly. After his brooding behaviour and recent outburst, they weren’t sure how to look at him.

“That’s an excellent job,” Carlos assessed, looking over the finished ritual circle. It was easily the most sophisticated circle Jason had ever seen. Normally, Clive’s power drew out magic diagrams in glowing golden lines. Most of the circle was still gold, but it featured a rainbow of colours in various sections, from vibrant red to cool green and bright, sky blue.

“I’d be tempted to let you conduct the ritual yourself, Mr Standish, if channelling the power of a gold rank ritual wouldn’t make you explode.”

“You mentioned that this is a gold rank ritual, earlier,” Rufus said. “I didn’t think a ritual of that rank was possible with the low magical density in this region.”

“Normally, no,” Carlos said. “You could probably perform a silver-rank ritual here, if you were careful, but not a gold. We’ll be using mana condensers.”

Carlos started taking what looked like simple lamps from his dimensional bag and placing them in the corners of the rooftop deck. Where the glow stone would go in a normal lamp, these had swirling lights of blue, silver and gold. It looked very much like the light shed by the transcendent damage of Jason’s execute power.

“Mana condensers are a tool for performing rituals requiring a higher magic density than is available in the local area,” Clive explained as Carlos set them out. “You charge them up, quite slowly, in a low magic area, and they can create an artificial field of high-density ambient magic. Very inefficient, but if it’s what you need, it’s what you need.”

He set out the lamps, along with other materials, most of which seemed to be different coloured crystals. There were also a number of gold spirit coins that, if you ignored certain items like the cloud palace, was more than all the wealth in Jason’s possession.

“Seems like a waste of coin,” Jason said.

“If you’re short on money, the church of the Healer will be happy to help you out,” Carlos said. “The information we get here will be critical going forward. If you’re willing to dedicate a number of hours to go over your experience and answers some questions as best you can. Maybe undergo an extra ritual or three to examine your condition. We can and will pay well for information on a subject that is very hard to come by right now.”

“It’ll help people, right?” Jason asked.

“Very much so,” Carlos said. “Even with the guidance of our god, the current methods we have for extracting star seeds are crude and brutal. Not everyone survives. The information we can potentially get from studying you could help us improve those methods significantly.”

“Helping people and getting paid for my trouble,” Jason said. “Sounds like adventuring to me.”

“Wait, you’re letting this guy study you?” Clive complained. “I ask you all the time.”

“He wants help healing people,” Jason said. “Not help streamlining his bureaucratic process.”

“Bureaucratic process?” Clive explained. “Do you have any idea how critical the work of the Magic Society is to...”

Clive trailed off as he saw Jason’s familiar sly grin and started muttering complaints to himself.

“Just about ready,” Carlos said. “For this one, everyone else should go down to that lower deck. Mr Standish, you can stay, if you think you have the expertise to avoid tainting the ritual.”

“I probably can but I’d rather not take the risk,” Clive said, following the others down the stairs to the lower deck.

From below they could hear, but not see the ritual being conducted. The chant was not in words, but unintelligible sounds.

“Non-linguistic chants are very difficult,” Clive said, “but they become more and more common in the higher-rank rituals.”

Around them on the marina, the surge of magic from the roof deck was drawing attention. The wealthy marina patrons tended to be essence users, many with perception powers that could sense the changes in the ambient magic. Those pointed out the surge in ambient magic density to others.

When the ritual was completed, every essence user in the marina and many in the Marina North district of the city felt an aura blast out. Incredibly domineering, but not the

individual power of a sovereign. It was more like a celestial law had passed over the area, filled with unyielding resolve and an echo of divine power.

Beyond the feel of the aura, it carried with it an overbearing suppressive force. Bronze-rankers and above were able to withstand the surging aura, while iron-rankers without solid aura control found themselves shaken and shivering. The only member of Jason's team present was Clive, who weathered the aura surge despite being at the epicentre. After resuming his adventuring after years as Magic Society official, he had benefited from Farrah's aura training, alongside Jason.

The people without aura senses actually fared better than the essence users, their lack of sensitivity giving them no more than a foreboding sense of unease.

High above the roof deck, darkness started spreading like a sinister cloud, covering a huge space. It was not a complete darkness, with a spread of dim, feeble stars like an oppressive night sky. Within the darkness, indistinct shapes moved and shifted, defined only by being darker than the sky around them. It was hard to make out their shapes or follow their movements, but what onlookers could see of the unnerving, alien forms made them glad that they could not.

In the centre of the darkness, a cluster of stars started glowing brighter, taking on the form of a cloak. The cloak opened and expanded, revealing that within was a clear blue sky and bright sun, like a universe contained within a dark void.

The dark shapes immediately started converging on the starlight cloak, tearing at it with shadowy claws. They rent the cloak but from every tear, sunlight flared out in the form of bright, grasping tendrils, clutching at the dark figures. They wrapping around the dark, alien shapes, which dissolved away like morning mist exposed to the sun. As they did, horrifying shrieks started emerging from the projection with each dark entities that was annihilated.

People looked up at the projection from all across the marina, feeling the source of the strange aura that had washed over them.

"This is Jason's soul?" Rufus asked. "You saw his personal crest, right, Clive?"

"Yeah," said weakly. "It was kind of like this, but it didn't have those things in it. Are they the star seed? Did it get in after all?"

"No," Carlos called out from above. His gold rank senses easily heard their conversation, even over the screeching. "They're the aftermath of the war he fought for his soul. The soul doesn't scar the same way the body does."

Carlos had not been anticipating anything like the power of the soul projection the ritual produced. He was worried that the gold-rank ritual was filtering too much power

through Jason's soul to create the projection but Jason seemed unperturbed. He was standing in the middle of the circle, eyes closed and completely relaxed.

Satisfied that Jason's soul was unviolated, Carlos brought the ritual to an end, the aura fading away and the image fading into nothing.

Chapter 213

I Won't Let Them Turn Me Into That

Jason didn't go straight back to adventuring, instead spending his time in training and recovery. His team spent their days participating in the hunt for Killian Laurent, whose possession and use of the star seed had made him a priority in the efforts to locate and fight against the cultists. He potentially had valuable information and unlike the suicide-prone cultists, he might be possible to capture.

At the same time, Silva had been locked up in the Adventure Society's prison tower, being asked some very pointed questions. It didn't help with the search for Laurent, only revealing the depth of ignorance Silva had about his former henchman. Silva did volunteer other information that was more actionable, however.

Unless someone had a specific power to do so, most long distance communication was conducted through speaking chambers. Two chambers could be connected, allowing the person in each chamber to project into a water clone in the other.

Most speaking chambers were housed within and operated by the Magic Society branches. One of the perks of being a branch director was the use of a private speaking chamber, annexed to their office. Lucian lamprey was using his, but the man on the other end was not telling him what he wanted to hear.

"We don't have anyone who's been there to open a portal, Lucian. Why would we? It's just an out of the way, provincial city that probably wouldn't exist if not for the spirit coin farms."

"Surely you can find someone?" Lamprey asked.

"Probably, but I won't. You were banished there for a reason, Lucian. You're all out of friends, here."

"All I need is one portal out."

The person on the other end of the communication sighed.

"I have someone who can portal to Hornis. If you can get there, I can maybe arrange something. It'll cost you, though."

"You owe me. From the old days."

"The old days are over, Lucian. I don't owe you a thing. Get to Hornis and message me again. We can work something out. If you have something to offer."

Lamprey went to speak but the person on the other end severed the connection. The water that made up the clone lost its animating force and splashed back into the pool.

Lamprey stormed out of the tiled booth.

“Hornis,” he muttered to himself. It was a port city, like Greenstone, south and around the coast. He would either have to take a ship and risk someone exposing his departure, or go overland, east into the veldt and then south. He decided that was the safer route, as the desert was not a threat to a silver ranker.

He opened the hidden safe in his office, shoving the contents into a dimensional bag before making for the door. Just as he left his office, he spotted Danielle Geller at the far end of the long hallway. She spotted him, in turn.

“Going out?” she called out to Lamprey. “That works out, because you need to come with me.”

“I’m busy right now, Lady Geller,” Lamprey said. “Another day.”

“Oh, I insist,” Danielle said.

They stared at each other down the hall for a long moment. Then, as if someone waved a starter’s flag, they both sprang into motion. Lamprey clapped his hands together in front of him, creating a wave of force that sent cracks along the stone walls, floor and ceiling. The art lining the walls was ripped apart, the windows shattered and floor tiles exploded, throwing up dust and debris that shrouded the hallway.

His attack was late before it had even begun; trying to move faster than Danielle Geller was an exercise in futility. By the time the hallway started erupting she had already teleported behind him, her blade cutting into his thick neck muscle. Lamprey was power to Danielle’s speed, however, and her sword barely dug into the flesh. He reached up and grabbed the blade while ramming his other elbow back into Danielle’s chest. His incredible strength fired her back like a rocket, through the doorway and across his office to bounce roughly off the wall.

Lamprey turned around, Danielle’s sword still gripped in his hand by the blade. He probed the wound with his free hand as he watched her push herself back to her feet.

“I knew you were tough,” she said, “but I thought that would do more.”

“You’ll have to cut me like that a thousand times if you want me to go down,” Lamprey sneered. Danielle gave him a predatory smile in return.

“Deal.”

She vanished, as did her sword, leaving behind a cut in Lamprey’s hand. Bloody lines started appearing on his body, Danielle’s movement nothing but a blur.

Even once his Adventure Society minder was gone, Jason rarely left the houseboat. Most of his time was spent refining his aura control. He quickly reached the point where he

could completely negate the effects of an iron-rank suppression collar and had begun working with a bronze-rank one. He could only hold off its effects for a few moments, but he knew exactly how valuable a few moments could be.

When he did leave, he remained unnoticed. He moved through Old City unseen, practicing his shadow teleportation. He needed it to reach bronze rank, hopefully opening a path back to the Order of the Reaper's astral space and the Builder cultists within.

Jason's friends clearly wanted to be supportive, although were largely at a loss as to how. Joining the pursuit for Killian was their way to try and find some closure on Jason's ordeal. In the meantime, Carlos and Arabelle both came by daily, carefully talking Jason through the events of his capture and escape.

Arabelle helped him explore the traumatic memories. For those strange feelings imprinted on his soul from when he had no mind to form memories, Carlos had techniques to help. Guided meditation was a large part of it, as was teaching Jason about the soul from a magical theory perspective. Jason's grasp of magical theory was continually improving and he was able to follow along at least with the fundamentals of what Carlos was talking about.

"Some people find a more intuitive approach helpful," Carlos told him. "Others, like you, seem to get more from understanding the way the soul functions, magically. Understanding and breaking down what they went through helps them process it."

One day, Carlos and Arabelle arrived at the houseboat with Arabelle's old team of her, her husband, the stealthy and enigmatic Callum Morse and Emir. Also with them were Danielle Geller, Constance and Hester.

"We wanted to come earlier," Emir told Jason. "Arabelle said it was best to wait."

Although his original purpose in Greenstone had been concluded, Emir's operation at Sky Scar Lake continued. Knowing that the Builder cult had infiltrated the astral space there, his people had been trying to find a way back in. Jason had been keeping something under his hat, not wanting to speak up until he was certain, but changed his mind.

"You asked me, before, if Shade had any insights that might help you get back into the astral space," Jason told him. "I didn't say anything at the time, but there might be something."

"Oh?" Emir asked.

"We can't test it out until my shadow teleport power reaches bronze rank," Jason said.

"Not what we're here for," Arabelle said, heading off the conversation.

“What are you here for?” Jason asked. “Not that I don’t appreciate the well-wishes.”

Carlos and Arabelle, as it turned out, had arranged an adventurer group therapy session. Jason had been through a lot, but no adventurer reached silver and gold rank without their own horror stories.

In the past, Jason had felt a step between himself and the experienced upper-rankers he knew. As they each shared their own tribulations, he felt a new sense of belonging. It was something he had been missing even before his recent troubles. His very nature as an outworlder marked him as an outsider. To share his story with others and have them share their’s in turn was like a puzzle piece fitting into the right space.

As they left the boathouse afterwards, Danielle took Jason aside.

“Someday, Humphrey and the others will face similar problems,” she told him and Jason nodded, understanding. Neither of them needed to say more.

It had been almost two months since Jason last set foot on the Adventure Society campus. He glanced over at the prison tower where both Lucian Lamprey and Cole Silva were incarcerated. Neither’s ultimate fate had yet been decided.

After the disastrous expedition and the subsequent wave of demotions, the campus had, for a time, become an almost desolate place. Then, after the Reaper trials, it had been overrun with time-displaced priests. With the expedition months gone and the priests sent off to whatever their new lives had become, it was back to the same bustle of activity Jason remembered from his early days as an adventurer. A lot of people were looking his way, either with furtive glances or openly staring. One woman even pointed right at him as she whispered to her companions. He ignored it as he made his way into the administration building and rode the elevating platform to the fifth floor.

“Morning, Bert,” Jason greeted, spotting Albert behind the executive level reception desk. “I see from your aura that the training is coming along.”

“Oh, you’re one to talk, Mr Asano. Bertram was working guard duty on the bridge when you set off your little display. You gave him a right good scare.”

“You can put that down to the ritual I was going through, not me.”

“If you say so, Mr Asano. Welcome back, by the way. It’s good to see you out and about, after what happened.”

“What exact are people saying, Bert?”

“All sorts, Mr Asano; you know what rumours are like. Magic mind control, crime lords, now Director Lamprey locked up in the prison tower. It’s all very exciting but no one seems sure if you’re victim or perpetrator, if you don’t mind me saying. And that’s without

that business with the aura projection. Nobody knows what to make of that. Plus there's talk of some village that got destroyed, the Duke sending out all those people and materials to rebuild."

"Thank you, Bert."

"If you don't mind me asking, Mr Asano, what did happen?"

Jason thought about it for a moment.

"Cole Silva and Lucian Lamprey tried to deal with me using the Builder cult as a weapon."

"It doesn't seem to have worked out so well for them," Albert said. "You being here and them locked up in the tower. It all came good in the end, then."

"It isn't the end," Jason said grimly. "Not until the cultists have been dragged out of their holes and tossed right out of our world."

"Well, I don't think I'd bet against you, Mr Asano."

"You know what, Bert? Neither would I."

Jason sat down across from Elspeth Arella. Tabitha Gert and her inquiry team had decamped from Greenstone while he had been on the road contract and Arella was once again in charge.

"Mr Asano."

"Director."

"We have something of a contentious past, you and I."

"We do," Jason agreed. "Rufus Remore agreed to put his support behind you in return for your father's help, however, and your father delivered. Since Rufus' support absolutely includes me, then you can consider yourself to have mine, for whatever worth you find that to have."

Arella examined Jason for a moment in silence. He was worlds apart from the brash, arrogant boy he had seemed in the past. The arrogance was still there, an unmistakable challenge in the eyes. But the precocious boy had been replaced with a steely-faced man.

"I have been looking at my tenure, following the enquiry as a fresh start," she said finally. "Perhaps you and I could do the same."

"That seems fair," Jason said.

"Very well, then on to business. I understand that Danielle Geller has been keeping you apprised of the investigation into Silva and now Lamprey."

"That's right."

“As the primary charges against them are against an Adventure Society member, the Adventure Society will be dealing with them. As it also involves the Builder cult, the decisions regarding them will be made above my level. I understand that Tabitha Gert will be portalling in to take them both. As the victim, however, you have the right to be heard in regards to their ultimate dispensation.”

“I prefer not to think of myself as a victim,” Jason said. “Also, giving the victims a say might feel right, but that’s a tool of vengeance, not justice.”

“You don’t want revenge?”

“Of course I do,” Jason said. “If you’d asked me what to do with them three weeks ago, I’d have said hang them from a tree and beat them until fabulous prizes come out. But that’s not the person I want to be and I won’t let them turn me into that. So long as they aren’t put in a position to keep hurting people, I don’t care what happens to them.”

“How very considered. Does Miss Wexler feel the same way?”

“I don’t think you should try for a fresh start with her,” Jason said. “She knows that you tried to sell her off to Lamprey and has different feelings about vengeance than I do. But you and I both made mistakes that she almost paid the price for, so I won’t go casting any stones.”

“We’ll leave it at that, then, and move on to the next issue. North East Quarry Village Number Four. You did excellent work, there.”

“Thank you,” Jason said.

“You and Henrietta Geller did a superlative job of building the Adventure Society’s reputation.”

“Also, helping people,” Jason said.

“Yes, of course. The Society would like to show its gratitude by supplying the materials required to resummon all your familiars. The ones you lost in that encounter, as well as the one that has now reached bronze rank.”

“You seem to know a lot about the state of my familiars.”

“This reward was suggested by your team. Mr Standish provided the list of supplies. I had to have someone portal them in, but after the expedition I’ve made a policy of always keeping a portal user on hand. Sending them all off together was a mistake I won’t make again.”

Jason gave it a short moment’s consideration, then nodded.

“Thank you,” he said.

“If you speak to the receptionist, he will direct you to pick them up. That just leaves the issue of your star ranking. Tabitha Gert promised that if you conduct yourself

acceptably, your rank will be restored to three stars. I think we can safely say that has happened. You will be needing a new badge because of the changes to your aura and your personal crest, so please present yourself to the Magic Society at your convenience.”

“Speaking of my aura,” Jason said, “are there any repercussions I need to know about following the aura projection incident?”

“Not that you need to concern yourself with.”

Chapter 214

Putting the Band Back Together

In the wake of Cole Silva's arrest, his organisation fell into chaos as Silva's cousins fought to seize control. At first it was restricted to carefully feeling out key people and quietly garnering loyalty. As days passed into weeks without a definitive leader rising up, it started causing trouble with street level operations and the conflict became bloodier.

In the midst of all this, Killian's trail was finally found, but far too late. It was eventually discovered that he had decamped the city entirely, taking a ship loaded with a good chunk of Cole Silva's ill-gotten holdings. Until the crew of that boat turned up somewhere, it was a dead end.

Jason felt that he turned a corner in his recovery with the resummoning of his familiars. He began with Gordon and then Shade, grateful to discover that they were the same familiars he had previously. While the bodies of the familiars would be the same with each summoning, the astral spirits inhabiting them could be different, if the original spirits did not want to re-enter his service.

"Your soul is rather changed," Shade observed. "You have been through an ordeal in the time I've been gone."

"It's been rough," Jason acknowledged. "Glad to have you back, mate."

"I am also glad to return," Shade said. "The Reaper's realm is a rather monotonous place. I did take the time to make enquires while I was there, however, under the assumption that you survived to resummon me. I am now more confident about accessing the Order of the Reaper's astral space."

Resummoning Colin was another thing entirely. Summoning his new bronze-rank vessel would require a bronze-rank ritual. Part of his recovery time had been spent continuing his study of magical theory and he had the instinctive understanding of his power to guide him. Despite this, he wasn't entirely confident about handling the increased sophistication and power the higher-rank ritual would require. He discussed the issue with Clive, who had a suggestion.

"You have that bronze-rank skill book, right? The one you took from Landemere Vane?"

Jason did, indeed, still have skill books detailing bronze-rank ritual and astral magic.

"They require bronze rank to use, though," Jason said.

“So, fake it,” Clive said. “Use a spirit coin before you use the skill book. It’ll be a strain, but nothing you can’t handle after what you’ve been through.”

Jason took Clive’s advice. Taking a seat in his cloud house, he consumed a bronze-rank spirit coin under Clive’s supervision, with Neil on hand in case it became too much. Unlike his previous uses, his enhanced awareness of his own soul let him sense exactly what the coin was doing to him. It flushed through his soul harmlessly, merging with his own power before flooding into his body. He gained a better understanding of the cost of using spirit coins as he could clearly feel the power was more than his body could contain. He would only be able to briefly use the power surge before his body blew a fuse and shut off.

Hurriedly, he used the skill book. As with the previous one he had used, the text floated out of the book, becoming a magical cloud hovering around him. The power of the coin faded, leaving him feebly slumped in the chair, but the it had done it’s work. Without reaching a false bronze-rank state, he wouldn’t have been able to trigger the book at all.

When the cloud of magical text started injecting itself into Jason’s body, something started going horribly wrong. Jason had experienced skill book use before and this was less strenuous than the huge tome that had contained his martial art. At the time he used that skill book, though, he hadn’t experienced the star seed implantation.

It started with a familiar feeling as his body was invaded. The skill book’s magic was entering his mind, not his soul but it was close enough that it awakened buried flashes of memory. Suddenly he was back in that room, hanging from the ceiling, vulnerable and helpless as his body and mind were invaded.

Clive and Neil watched in horror as Jason tumbled out of the chair and onto his knees, clutching at his head and screaming. Neil started to cast a healing spell but Clive stopped him.

“Don’t,” Clive warned urgently. “Muddling the magic going into him right now could do some real damage.”

“What do we do?” Neil asked.

“All we can do is let him go through it,” Clive said unhappily.

Eventually the screaming stopped and Jason was laying on the floor, looking up with blank eyes.

“He’s not breathing,” Clive said.

“He’s been training,” Neil said. “I’ve been helping him with it. He doesn’t breath at all, now.”

After the problem with the skill book, Jason didn't move on to resummoning Colin right away. He continued to work with Arabelle, Carlos having departed the city. He was important to the star seed implantation recovery efforts and couldn't be spared for more than a couple of weeks on one person. He helped Jason through the worst and Jason did everything he could to give Carlos information he could use to help others, the only reason The Adventure Society and his church had let him stay as long as he did.

Having his other familiars back helped. Their presence in his soul was a comfort, a support when he awoke from a nightmare or suffered another flashback.

He concentrated on other tasks. More training, but also more mundane affairs. One of them was his new beard. It was trimmed light, with a line next to the chin where a thin scar was. Another bisected his left eyebrow.

"I'm still not sure about the beard," he said at breakfast.

"I like it," Neil said. "It covers your face."

"No, it's really good," Belinda said. She was the one who suggested he keep it in the first place.

"It doesn't make me look like a villain?"

"Isn't seeming like a villain kind of your thing?" Gary asked.

"Stop discouraging him," Belinda said. "It looks good, doesn't it, Soph?"

Sophie looked up from her sausage and eggs to give Jason an intense stare. Finally she nodded.

"Your face is too pointy," she said. "It softens the edges."

"I'd have said that it flatteringly frames your facial structure," Belinda said, "but I'd take it. For Sophie, that was a gushing compliment."

Eventually Jason decided it was time to resummon Colin. After using the skill book he had delved into the theory to consolidate his knowledge. Now he was as ready as he was going to be. After the skill book, his whole team was going to be present for support, along with Rufus and Gary.

For each earlier familiar re-summoning, he had hired out a ritual room in the Magic Society, rather than do it on the houseboat. The cloud floor of the houseboat was not ideal for drawing out ritual circles, lacking the dedicated, hard-floored ritual rooms of Emir's cloud palace.

Jason did so again for Colin's ritual, Clive helping him pick out the one with the facilities to hose the room down afterward. He began preparations by stripping down to his

underwear. No one mentioned the scars speckling his body, or the one long scar across his torso.

“Is that really necessary?” Neil asked. No one wants to see your skinny body.”

“This will be messy, if the last time is anything to go by,” Jason said.

“It really was,” Gary agreed. “We never actually cleaned that room after, we just picked up his unconscious body and snuck off.”

“There’s no point ruining good clothes,” Jason said. “Sorry we can’t all be super buff like you, Neil. Which reminds me, we need to take you to get some more flattering clothes. Seriously, who makes that stuff?”

“My aunt is quite interested in fashion design.”

“Oh, I get it now,” Jason said. “Is she too influential to tell how bad her work is, or are you all just being nice.”

“She controls a fairly good portion of the family’s holdings, yes,” Neil acknowledged.

“Fair enough, then. Just tell her that your team leader made you get a new wardrobe to fit in with the group.”

“Since when are you the team leader?” Neil asked.

“Of course I’m the team leader,” Jason said. “I have the best hair.”

“Sophie has the best hair,” Neil said.

“I’m the most handsome?”

“Not even top three,” Neil said.

“There’s only four guys in the team,” Jason said dejectedly.

“Maybe you should start the ritual now?” Clive suggested.

Jason nodded and started setting out the circle and the materials, mostly bronze-rank blood quintessence gems. Jason took a razor from his inventory and sliced the back of his hand, letting Colin spill out onto the ground. The leech pile spread out around the diagram, seeming to have an instinctive understanding of where to go.

“Alright, little mate,” Jason told Colin. “See you again soon.”

Jason began the ritual. Lines of red life force drifted out of the leeches and fed into Jason, the leeches withering into nothing. Even with that extra life force, the ritual took a heavy toll on Jason. At the edge of his vision, his mana and stamina bars emptied rapidly as mental and physical exhaustion overtook him. The little body shape indicating damage went from green to red all over as blood started seeping from his pores, spilling down his body to flow into the middle of the circle where it vanished.

Once again, Jason's mind tried to drag him back to his torture, the memory of his body being ravaged by the star seed. He willed himself to stay in the moment. He felt his other familiars residing inside him. He glanced up at his friends, looking on with concern.

He dropped to one knee, struggling to stay conscious. Half as much blood loss would have killed a normal person. It all flowed into the circle and vanished, until all that Jason had put in and more started spilling from the floor like a wellspring, inundating the ritual circle, only to stop when it reached the edge.

Crawling up out of the pool came a leech, no different to Colin's previous form. It had the same slick, wormy body and gaping maw with circular rings of oversized lamprey teeth. It was joined by a second, then a third, more and more emerged until they were being pushed out like meat from a grinder.

Strips of bloody cloth emerged from the mass, gathering the leeches together and wrapping them up. Like compression bandages, they pushed the leeches together into shape, slowly binding them up into a humanoid form.

The sanguine horror Jason, Gary, Rufus and Farrah had fought had taken on the appearance of a mummy. While the basic form Colin has taken was similar it was not identical. Along with bundling the leeches into shape, the strips of cloth had formed a ragged cloak and hood, draping off the humanoid figure.

"I think it's trying to look like you, Jason," Humphrey said.

Jason didn't hear him, kneeling on the floor. His body was ravaged and he was desperately trying to keep his mind from going back to the torture room.

Once the figure finished forming, the bloody strips dried, leaving them a rusty colour. It reached out to help Jason to his feet and he grasped the crude, fingerless hand.

-
- Colin (sanguine horror).
 - Familiar (bronze rank).

 - Swarm. Hive mind.
 - Bites from the leech swarm inflict [Bleeding], [Leech Toxin] and [Necrotoxin].
 - Leech attacks drain health and stamina, allowing the rapid replacement of destroyed biomass.
 - Ranged entangling attacks can be made using cloth strips. Grips inflict minimal constriction damage but periodically inflict [Leech Toxin] and [Necrotoxin] if an area with an open wound is grabbed or the target is suffering the [Bleeding] condition.
 - While subsumed within the summoner, the summoner has accelerated healing and stamina recovery. Healing and recovery rate is determined by how much biomass was absorbed and increases with the summoner's level of injury.
-

In addition to the changes to Colin's form, the healing he provided would now increase the more Jason was injured, the value of which was obvious. Jason had Colin walk around a little, which the familiar did, hesitantly at first and then with increasing confidence. Its new pseudo-human guise was faster than the leech pile of its previous form, although it still couldn't move much faster than a hurried shuffle.

"Alright Colin," Jason said wearily. "Time to come home."

Through his instinctive sense of the familiar ability, Jason could sense that he would no longer need to cut himself for Colin to enter or leave his body. He reached out a hand, Colin doing the same and the familiar was absorbed directly in through the skin. It happened in a comical rush, like a cartoon character being sucked into a vacuum cleaner. Jason immediately felt Colin go to work healing him heal and recover. He looked down at his bloodied body and pulled out a bottle of crystal wash.

Chapter 215

Nothing Speaks Louder Than Power

The return of Jason's familiars went a long way to helping him feel better. With his improved soul sense he could feel their comforting presence within him much more strongly than before, even retaining a sense of connection when they were out of his body. It didn't match the connection of a bonded familiar, like Humphrey had with Stash, but it was enough to give him a confidence that he had been lacking for some time.

He had not yet returned to adventuring but he did start making some social excursions. This started with Gary arriving at the houseboat to take Jason out to the delta, to take a look at the construction site of the training annex for Rufus' academy. They rode out using two of Shade's bodies in horse form, void black but with glowing white hooves, mane and eyes. Mist shrouded each of the hooves, leaving a trail as the horses sped along the delta embankment roads.

"So these are the horses you keep talking about," Gary said. "They're kind of like heidels, but only having one head is weird."

"Most things only have one head," Jason said and patted Horse-Shade on the neck. "Shade is quite a bit more handsome than regular horses, though."

In horse form, Shade manifested with reins and saddle, but no bit. The ride was soft and smooth, Shade not being a true animal but a creature of shadow-stuff. Shade was also able to run over the surface of water, which cut time comfortably off their journey.

They rode around the huge walls marking the edge of the Geller Estate grounds until they reached the construction site. Greenstone was to the west of the estate, while the construction site was just outside the south walls.

The Remore Academy Training Annex would primarily be made of stone, like most buildings in the region where wood was at a premium. Gary had been recruited to create metal frames and reinforcement before the stone went in, using the powers of his forge essence to create alloys heavier and stronger than steel.

"I do a lot of construction work back in Vitesse," Gary explained as he and Rufus led Jason around the site. "Being only bronze rank, we don't get the freedom to go out adventuring that we get here, so it's a nice little side earner."

"It's that restrictive?" Jason asked.

"It's not too bad," Rufus said. "You don't go out without a silver-ranker, though. Even if your team can handle a silver rank monster, if you get a whole pack of them, a bad

match-up for your team or a gold-rank monster then your team can end up dead very quickly. At higher ranks, monsters tend to be harder to run away from.”

“All that is especially true when a monster surge is due,” Gary said. “The increase in silver-rank monsters here is a clearly a surge precursor, and in Vitesse that increase is in gold-rank monsters.”

“It means the monster surge is close, right?” Jason asked.

“Maybe,” Rufus said. “It could be weeks, or even months, still, which is why we went ahead with construction.”

Jason’s friends continued to drag him out of the houseboat, to the point that he realised Arabelle had suggested they help Jason break out of his self-imposed isolation. He started taking his own steps out, including making use of the Musical Society membership he had purchased months ago, only to be too busy to really use. Making use of his own private viewing booth at the concert hall let him get out without needed to deal with other people too much.

Jason’s progress was not all forward, however. Nightmares were frequent and flashbacks could sneak up in him in unexpected moments. Arriving early for the symphony one night, something about the orchestra tuning their instruments triggered a flashback and he fled his booth, stumbling through the hall and into one of the empty rooms around the concert hall. He was leaning against a window when he felt a familiar aura draw closer. He turned, wild-eyed, to the opening door.

“Hello Jason.”

Cassandra’s face was filled with concern.

“I saw you in the hall,” she said. “You didn’t look well and your aura was all over the place.”

“It’s fine,” he said with a grimace, leaning back against the cool glass of the window.

“I heard about what happened to you,” she said softly. She stayed at a distance by the door, as if afraid of scaring off a skittish animal.

“What did you hear?” he asked

“They put one of those things in you. Like Thadwick.”

“Not like Thadwick,” Jason snarled, his face flashing anger, then regret.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I know your brother is still missing. But I wasn’t taken over.”

“I heard that too,” she said. “A lot of people don’t believe it.”

“I don’t care what a lot of people think,” he said. “Everyone I care about the opinion of knows better.”

“I’m sorry for how my family treated you,” she said. “Treated us.”

“They did what’s right for them,” Jason said. “Don’t we all.”

“No,” Cassandra said. “I heard about what happened in that village, too. Not many would stand up to a silver rank monster like that.”

Jason’s aura was settling. Her’s was a calming presence, intermingling with his in an echo of their former connection as lovers. She moved closer, slowly making her way across the room.

“Your aura is so different,” she said. “I can barely recognise it.”

“A lot has happened since we last met.”

Her smile carried the bitterness of their last encounter.

“You got your promotion back.”

“Impatience seems to be a Mercer family trait.”

“It has cost us, more than once.”

She arrived in front of Jason. After a brief pause, she wrapped her arms around him comfortingly and he didn’t resist, resting his head on her chest.

“We could have been something, couldn’t we?” she said sadly.

“Maybe,” he said.

“Probably for the best,” she said. “I would not be putting up with that beard.”

Still leaning into her chest, he burst out laughing.

Danielle had Humphrey drag Jason and his team to a large social gathering at the Geller townhouse on the Island. For Belinda and Sophie it was the first time attending such an event without a plan to steal from the attendees. In an elegant white dress, Sophie garnered no small amount of attention. Humphrey, who was raised in such settings, helped her navigate the new waters, adroitly driving away the sharks. If not for his social expertise she would have had to resort to her own, which was not event appropriate. She had made sure, that if it came to that, the slit in the leg of her dress would free up her high kicks.

“I robbed that guy,” she said quietly as they circulated. “And that one. Good thing Belinda is good at making disguises.”

Jason found himself in an odd social position, due to the various stories and events he had been caught up in. His success in the Reaper trials, along with his closeness to the gold rankers every social climber in the room wanted to connect with lifted up his prestige. The rumours floating around after his kidnapping and the aura projection incident made the waters rather murky, however.

At one point in the evening, the bronze-rank scion of an aristocratic family approached Jason, his breath reeking of drink and his aura reeking of monster cores.

“You shouldn’t even be allowed around decent people,” he slurred in Jason’s direction. “How do we know you don’t still have one of those things in you? You could be working for them.”

“That’s enough brother,” a woman said, stepping out to try and lead the man away. Jason recognised her as Liana Stelline, a member of mid-tier aristocratic clan. She had been part of Jason and Humphrey’s field assessment group, joining the Adventure Society alongside them.

“Kyle, it’s time to go home.”

Her brother shrugged her off, pointing a finger in Jason’s face.

“What do you think you’re doing, coming into our city? You were probably one of them from the start. I bet you set up all our people that died on the expedition!”

The room went very still. The high society of Greenstone had pushed their way onto the expedition, with Sophie and Belinda being the only ones in the room other than the serving staff not to have lost someone close to them.

Kyle was the only one not to sense the shift in the atmosphere, despite it being pointed at him. His aura senses were too addled by drink to feel the auras around the room grow fierce and hard.

“You should take your sister’s advice and go,” Jason said, restraining his own aura. With the fury burning inside him, he didn’t trust what he would do with it if he let it go. The rage he had built up over recent events was more than some drunken idiot deserved to have unleashed on him. Unfortunately, the idiot in question took Jason’s restraint for weakness.

Not sensing any aura, despite the provocation, Kyle used his own aura to push down on Jason. His aura control was sloppy, but still had a bronze-rank soul behind it. There was a limit to Jason’s tolerance, however, and Jason’s own aura rose out like monster from the deep. It devoured Kyle’s bronze rank aura projection with ease, biting down like a vast maw until Kyle felt its teeth against his naked soul.

Jason stopped himself before following through with the soul attack. Kyle’s expression had become stricken with fear and he collapsed to the floor, Jason stepping forward to stand right over him.

“You should be very careful about accusing me of getting my friends killed,” he said, his voice a jagged blade of ice. “Liana, take your brother home.”

Jason retracted his aura and Liana quickly shuffled off her wide-eyed sibling, his resistance now gone. Oddly, this encounter had the opposite effect of what Jason anticipated, bringing the approval of many who had been uncertain about him. In a world of adventurers, wealth and influence were fine but unadulterated magical potency made their acquisition an inevitability. Jason's display made it clear that his potential was blossoming into capability.

Danielle swooped in to lock elbows, reminding everyone that she had the foresight to support him when others were overlooking him.

"Nothing speaks louder than power," she told him.

She wasn't foolish enough to miss a social opportunity when it presented itself and guided Jason around the room to make introductions she had previously been avoiding. One of these was to the Duke of Greenstone, who was talking to his brother and his sister-in-law, Beaufort and Thalia Mercer.

"Beaufort, Thalia," Danielle greeted. "You know Jason, of course."

Thalia knew Jason better than her husband, but Jason had met the man during his relationship with Cassandra.

"I believe this will be your first time speaking with him, Duke," Danielle continued.

"A pleasure, Duke," Jason said, shaking the man's hand. "Naturally, I've seen you at various social functions but I daresay you never noticed a little iron-ranker like me."

"Well, everyone noticed you now," the Duke said with a wry smile. From what he had heard of the man, Jason hadn't anticipated liking the Duke. To his surprise, he found the man very personable, not looking down on Jason at all for his rank or station.

"We've been discussing the issue of Old City," the Duke said. "The infighting in the Silva family as it looks for new leadership is escalating into street violence. The organisation built up by the late Clarissa Ventress is looking to go the same way. It was stable for a while, but her replacement isn't keeping things together and is unlikely to hold his position. Fortunately, Adris Dorgan is keeping quiet instead of fanning the flames. If he changes his approach, however, the streets of Old City may well become a war zone. At that point I will have no choice but to step in to restore order. I'd rather avoid that outcome so soon after the Builder cult purge."

"I still say you should just do it now, before things get out of hand," Beaufort said.

"Perhaps you can offer us some insight, Mr Asano," the Duke said. "You have some experience with the Big Three, do you not?"

"I've met Adris Dorgan and I liked the man. I've heard good things from people I trust that know him better. I never met Clarissa Ventress or her replacement, but again, I know

people that did. They were less flattering. As for Cole Silva, well... if you spend four days hanging from a ceiling with no pants on while a guy stands there watching you the whole time, I guess you could say you know him.”

“How colourful,” the Duke said with a chuckle. “So, what insights can you offer?”

“Well,” Jason said. “I haven’t really been paying attention, so I may be missing some of the political nuance, but the solution seems obvious.”

“Oh?” the Duke prompted.

“It’s time to end your hands-off approach of Old City and take direct control. At this point, Adris Dorgan is essentially the mayor of Old City, so you might as well make it official. Between his daughter running the Adventure Society and his rising level of influence after his assistance flushing out the Builder cult, he’s heavily invested in legitimacy at this point. Place him under you officially and you’ve got a handle on the one man who has a genuine chance to take the pot off the fire before it boils over. It’ll also send a signal to the people scrabbling over the vacant positions in the Big Three. Once they realise that era of criminal overlords is over, they won’t be willing to fight as hard. There will still be crime bosses, obviously, but they won’t have the power they did in the past, which will de-escalate the infighting.”

The Duke raised his eyebrows, turning to Danielle.

“Is this you?” he asked. Danielle held up her hands in a display of blamelessness as Jason looked between her and the Duke.

“You told him the same thing?” Jason asked her.

“She did,” the Duke said. “She also used the word obvious.”

“That’s just my uninformed opinion,” Jason said. “I have no doubt there would be a slew of political obstacles to navigate. And, of course, nothing will prevent the violence altogether. To be honest, I’m biased because I think very poorly of the lack of actual civilian authority in Old City. The Big Three may have done some good to keep order as a de facto government, but they are ultimately a predatory one. They operate in a gap left by the inaction of existing civil authorities.”

The Duke chortled.

“You do realise that the existing civil authorities is essentially me?”

“My friend Humphrey likes to say that privilege comes with responsibility,” Jason said.

“He’s a good boy,” Danielle said.

“I have to say, Mr Asano,” the Duke said. “You certainly live up to your reputation.”

Jason shook his head sadly.

“When you’re this handsome,” he bemoaned, “of course people are going to talk.

Why won’t they let a guy live his life?”

Danielle ran a hand over her face.

“You just can’t help yourself, can you?”

Chapter 216

My Name is Jason Asano

Elizabeth Silva stirred when she felt something press down on her large, canopy bed. There was a young man in a dark suit sitting on the other side, cross-legged. She opened her mouth to call for her guards, before stopping herself. If they could have helped, they already would have. Her bronze rank aura senses couldn't detect the man's aura at all, which meant that he was dangerous.

"Hello, Miss Silva," the man said. "I'm sorry to call on you so late."

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I want you to understand that Old City is changing," the man said. "The days of criminal rule are coming to an end. Other members of your family have come to understand this, but you've only seen weakness instead of wisdom and pushed them all the harder. People are being hurt, innocent people, and I'm here to convince you to stop."

"So you're one of Dorgan's dogs," she said.

"No," the man said. "I'm an adventurer, and I have a contract. To make people like you understand that these are new times. No one is saying you can't be a crime boss. Wiping out crime altogether would be pointless and foolish to even attempt, and having people like you retain a measure of power keeps the chaos to a minimum. But that's what you get: a measure. The days of the Big Three are over and trying to bring them back will only cause more bloodshed, which I promise will include yours."

"So the high and mighty Island government is going to bring us to heel with death threats?"

The young man smiled.

"If I have to come back here, Miss Silva, you'll find my mercy does not extend to killing you. My name is Jason Asano."

A cold fear washed over her body as she recognised the name.

"Your cousin went to some effort to destroy me. I took longer than I should have to rectify the scenario and my friends interrupted before I had my taste of recompense. I would advise against being the means by which I assuage my disappointment."

A shadow rose up behind Asano, moved over his body and he was gone.

Belinda had finally undertaken her field assessment and the team were gathered in the marshalling yard to await her return. With them was a rather nervous Jory. The marshalling yard was crowded, with many new essence users that had appeared in the

wake of the Reaper trials. The drop in market price for essences wasn't a true democratisation of power, but many of Greenstone's only reasonably well-off families were adding adventurers to their ranks. An adventurer who found success would be able to raise their family up with them.

Normally, the crowd gathered waiting would be the families of the wealthy and powerful. This had been the case when Jason took his field assessment. Before the expedition disaster shook their faith, they had been so proud, so sure of themselves. In the wake of that, some families had realised their errors and corrected. They instituted new training programs for their essence users, frequently turning to the more successful adventuring families like the Cavendish, Mercers and Geller clans for guidance. This helped cement such families at the top of the Greenstone pile.

Other families had been looking for anywhere but themselves to place the blame. Loudly decrying the failures of Danielle Geller and Elspeth Arella, they had gone so far as to seek restitution from the Gellers and the Adventure Society itself.

The results of these different approaches were reflected in the changes brought about by the Adventure Society's inquiry team. The families that looked to fix their mistakes and used the people they lost as a chance to grow and improve, their positions within the Adventure Society improved in kind. After the sweeping demotions, these were the groups that most frequently had their previous rankings reinstated.

Those that made an enemy of the Adventure Society obviously fared less well. Arguably the single most powerful political entity on the planet, the Adventure Society had no time for the admonitions of some lower-tier aristocrats in one provincial city. Those families found their demotions upheld, even suffering additional waves of demotion. Many found their family members had their Adventure Society membership revoked entirely.

Oddly, the outcry of fools railing against them was helpful to both Danielle Geller and Elspeth Arella. The more they were blamed, the more clearly the blame fell on systemic problems within the local adventurer culture that neither Danielle nor Arella were responsible for. Danielle spent most of her time away from the city, and whatever revelations had come out regarding her motivations, Arella had been taking concrete steps to rectify the corruption within her branch.

While the old adventuring families were undergoing changes in the wake of the expedition, the people gathered in the marshalling yard represented a new, post-expedition movement in Greenstone. Where the old guard had a new sense of caution and humility, these new adventurers were filled with optimism and hope.

The people around Jason's team were more aspirational than established, anxious for the return of the person they had placed all their hopes on. For many families, having an adventurer amongst them was a chance to lift all of them up.

Jason knew that the reality was more harsh. Even amongst Greenstone's elite, only a handful of families were producing quality adventurers. Jason had seen the results of shattered illusions in young adventurers, like those who fell under the sway of insidious nobility like Thadwick Mercer or criminals like Cole Silva. Such people rarely met good ends. Of those that had followed Thadwick, half had ended up dead at Jason's own hand. He at least took solace that some of the others had managed to find fresh beginnings.

Jason considered group that had fallen under Thadwick's thumb. In the course of investigating Thadwick's shady land-grab scheme, Jason had decided the fate of most of them one way or another. The ones who had come for him before had died at his hands.

Months later he was still troubled by how quickly and easily he had turned to killing. He wondered if letting them go would have been better, but they had come for him once before and brought larger numbers the second time. Perhaps the longer he left it, the more killing it would have meant in the end.

Two of Thadwick's former lackeys had managed to find some measure of redemption. Dean was the one Jason had managed to put back on the straight and narrow. Disillusioned when his dreams of being a grand adventurer fell flat, he had been pulled into Thadwick's orbit at his lowest point. Jason helped him find his way back, and while he was never going to be an exceptional adventurer, there was still a place for him in Greenstone's Adventure Society.

The other of the pair was Jerrick. Where Dean had surrendered immediately that day, Jerrick had fought it out, with Jason taking him alive. Rather than being tried, he had been stricken from the Adventure Society as part of the quiet covering-up of Thadwick's activities. After Thadwick, Jerrick had fallen in with Cole Silva. Then risked everything to betray Silva and lead Jason's companions to him in his hour of greatest need.

Whether or not it was a cynical choice to try and get his way back into the Adventure Society, Jason didn't much care. When asked for his input, he voiced no objection to Jerrick's reinstatement to the Adventure Society. Jason met with him once after his reinstatement, advising him to work his way up using his own strength, rather than attach himself to others. Whether Jerrick took his advice or not was up to him, no longer Jason's concern.

Caught up in his thoughts, Jason was stirred out of them by the attention his team was getting. His aura senses detected the attention of normal people with no way to

control their own auras. Humphrey and himself were both fairly well known and his entire team were expensively outfitted. Jason had finally taken Neil into Gilbert's Resilient Attire For the Discerning Gentleman and Neil had come out looking annoyingly good.

Occasionally, someone would try and make a social approach, only to think better of it. Jason was helping this along with the subtle aura he was projecting to heighten their unease. It was a trick he had picked up from Humphrey's mother, who had been showing him some nuances of aura control normally held off until bronze or even silver rank.

"Has my mother spoken to you yet about the training program she was talking about?" Humphrey asked Jason.

"She's mentioned it," Jason said. "I don't hate the idea of what they're doing."

Danielle and Arella had a strained relationship since the expedition, but both women recognised that as important figures in the adventuring community they would need to put aside their differences. Danielle had told Jason about a program they were looking to develop, offering the new wave of adventurers some basic training. The goal was to prevent too many from falling into the patterns that had put so many essence users under the sway of the Big Three.

"Mother quietly thinks they can change the entire tenor of Greenstone's adventuring culture," Humphrey said.

"Her and the director seem determined to have something good come out of their shared mistake," Jason said. "I have a lot of respect for that."

"What do you think?" Humphrey asked. "Are you going to join in?"

"I'm not sure I'm qualified to teach anyone anything," Jason said. "This time last year I didn't even believe in magic."

"It's just fundamental aura control," Humphrey said. "Are you seriously going to stand there, using your aura like that, and say you can't teach someone the basics?"

"What's she roped you into teaching?" Jason asked.

"Basic martial technique. She's roped in a bunch of people, hasn't she, Sophie?"

"If the Adventure Society is paying, I'll take it," Sophie said.

"I've agreed to join in, too," Neil said. "Not to teach anything, but make sure Sophie's instruction doesn't kill anyone."

"I'm not responsible for other people being weak," Sophie said.

"Actually," Jason said, "If you've agreed to teach people to fight, you're directly responsible for them being weak."

She tilted her head thoughtfully. "Huh. I guess you're right."

The first wagon full of would-be adventurers arrived in the marshalling yard. It was a large intake, so they had gone out in separate groups.

“She’s going to pass, right?” Jory asked nervously.

“Of course she will,” Sophie said. “Right?”

“Right,” Neil said. “She has her full set of powers and she’s been on a road contract. She’s more qualified than any of us were for our assessments.”

“So, what next?” Neil asked. “Back to adventuring?”

“We need to be looking for the right contracts, ones that will get us to bronze,” Humphrey said. “The hardest iron-rank contracts we can find, plus any bronze ones we can get. Now Jason is back to three stars, the application process to claim a bronze-rank contract is much simpler.”

“We can do that?” Neil asked.

“It isn’t done in Greenstone a lot,” Humphrey said. “Beth Cavendish and her team have been taking some bronze-rank contracts, since the Reaper trials. The approval process is a pain unless you have a three star, which she is.”

Groups of would-be adventurers started arriving, including Belinda’s and she dashed over to share hugs with Sophie and Jory.

“Any problems?” Jason asked.

“I’m quietly confident,” Belinda said. “I thought Vincent would go easy on me, though. Aren’t he and Rufus a thing?”

“The fact that he didn’t go easy on you is the reason he and Rufus are a thing,” Jason said. “They’re both big on integrity.”

With the whole team officially on the Adventure Society rolls, they threw themselves into contracts, with an eye to raising their abilities. Belinda and Sophie had the most abilities in need of raising, so the team put them forward more than the others. Aside from Clive, each member of the team had their own new powers to master, though.

Clive was the closest to hitting bronze, having been an adventurer for the longest and possessing the accelerated advancement speed of a human. He was quietly letting the others take the forefront in the training, not wanting to reach bronze yet. If it was possible to access the Order of the Reaper’s astral space, it was most likely that the iron-rank restriction was still in place. Once inside they would all be free to hit bronze rank, as some of the Reaper trial participants had done the first time through. Leaving the space had not been an issue for them.

For Jason it was his familiars that required the most work but his real attention was on path of shadows, his shadow teleport ability. He had only told Clive that there was a chance of finding a way back into the Order of the Reaper's astral space and Clive had been quietly working on the issue using information both from Emir's people and from Shade.

The iron-rank contracts were a chance for Belinda to keep cutting her teeth on iron rank monsters, since her abilities were at the lowest level on the team. They continued the technique they had learned from Henrietta of mixing up combinations of team members and solo operations to push her into using different powers. The team was always on hand to step in if something went wrong.

The others were seeking out large groups of iron-rank monsters, or bronze-rank ones when they could get them. Humphrey and Jason would even take them on alone, both having powers that helped them to bridge the rank gap.

As the mild desert winter moved almost imperceptibly into spring, the team took an unconventional contract. East of Greenstone, inland beyond the desert, lay the veldt. The people there were hardy and tough, beyond the reach of the desert astral space and its oases. They rarely called on the Adventure Society, but had sent word to Greenstone that a group of essence user bandits had taken up in their area.

The inhabitants of the veldt kept mostly to themselves and even when it came to monsters they usually handled them on their own. The use of every essence found by the loose-knit band of communities was collectively decided on, with a small group of local monster hunters serving them all. They would only turn to the Adventure Society in Greenstone if something beyond their abilities turned up. The people had an isolationist pride, but also a practicality born of hardscrabble survivalist principles.

Led by a bronze-ranker and with too many essence users for the locals to deal with, the bandits had taken over a whole town, killing most of the residents and enslaving the rest. They had started raiding the other small towns of the veldt, trading loot and slaves to the nomadic tribes of the north.

When Elspeth Arella had offered them the contract, Jason and Humphrey had discussed at length whether to take it. With the number of bandits, the remoteness of their location and the chaos they had caused, there was no stipulation for capture in the contract. The order was to put them all down.

Jason was reluctant but Humphrey had been adamant.

"Jason, those people are going to die. The Adventure Society will send someone out there to kill them and not everyone has your scruples. I'd rather do it out of a sense of

responsibility than send someone looking for a chance to kill actual people instead of monsters.”

“Are there really adventurers that bloodthirsty?” Jason asked.

“Yes,” Humphrey said. “I’ve heard stories from my family. Been told how to recognise the signs of adventurers I should never team up with. The kind of people who will kill the bandits and then kill their victims because they can. Then they’ll blame it on the bandits and no one can say otherwise.”

“And the Adventure Society allows this?”

“Of course not,” Jason said. “But out in the wilderness, who’s to say what happened? Every now and again there’ll be a push to implement rules about using recording crystals when the contract is to take down real people but there is always resistance. There are some valid arguments against it, like the recording crystals being detectable, but mostly adventurers don’t like anything that reeks of shackles.”

“I can sympathise,” Jason said.

Eventually Jason came around. They had taken a boat upriver, then Clive requisitioned a Magic Society skimmer from the local depot and they made their way into the veldt. It was there that they met with Keith of the local monster hunters, who led them to the bandit town. Jason had gone in alone to scout before returning to the team.

He had discovered that the bandits were from Greenstone. Criminal essence users from the Silva and Ventress organisations, they had seen the changes coming and left the city altogether, knowing the Big Three would no longer provide them with the same level of reward for big fish in a small pond. Many feared they would be held to account for past misdeeds, using their power within the criminal underworld to live out their most depraved desires.

Under a charismatic leader, they had gone out into the veldt where they believed the Greenstone authorities would not follow. Without the controlling hand, however, they had gone wild. The escalating series of atrocities they were carrying out as they raided the local townships had quickly led the locals to call on the Adventure Society.

After scouting out their town, Jason told his team that he wanted to handle the bandits alone. They immediately refused, but just as Humphrey had talked him into taking the contract, he talked them into letting him do it alone. They were reluctant but this situation was nothing like when he was taken by Silva. He would be fighting on his own terms, with his team nearby to provide backup if things went wrong. The town, he argued, was perfectly set up for him to fight using tactics that would allow him to use his abilities to their fullest.

It took Jason some time to get them to come around. Ultimately, they were convinced by his determination and resolve. The unflinching hardness of his eyes was a perfect reflection of his aura. Once they agreed, their local guide was flabbergasted.

“He’s just one iron-ranker!”

Jason didn’t respond as his shadow rose up, passing over him and he vanished. Clive sent an expensive, long-range recording crystal flying high up over the town. A projection crystal hovered in front of them, showing what the first crystal recorded.

“You’ll be able to see what happens for yourself,” Clive said.

Chapter 217

While They Watch Me Kill You

The town was little more than a cluster of stone and clay buildings along a single main street. It was not the better for its new residents, with unrepaired signs of essence abilities being thrown about. Walls were cracked with impact rings and scorched with the flash-burn signature of fire powers.

All seemed quiet, with no sign of Jason. There were bandits around the town, along with some miserable-looking unfortunates that the bandits were using as slaves. The bandits sat around, playing cards or molesting one of their more attractive slaves. There were men and women amongst the bandits, who cared more about toughness and malevolence over gender. Essences absolved any natural disparity in physical power between the sexes.

There was a corpse pinned to a wall with large stone spikes, that the bandits paid no mind. Unseen in the shadows, Jason watched one of the enslave former residents look longing at the outskirts of the town, then fearfully at the dead body. Even with a head start, there was nowhere to hide in the sparse, flat terrain of the veldt. It was nothing but low grass marked by the occasional lonely tree.

The bandits languid day was disturbed when one came staggering out of a building. It was a poor village and there were no doors on any of the buildings which had the bandit loudly stumbling through a curtain of beads before collapsing on the ground, blood pooling under his head. His fellows rushed over and turned over the body, finding his throat cut.

“Someone killed Craig!”

Paying attention to the body, they didn't notice a pair of blood-red strips of ragged cloth snake out of the doorway the dead bandit had emerged from. Only once they wrapped themselves around the corpse's legs were they spotted, the bandits watching in startlement as the corpse was rapidly dragged back into the building.

“What was that?”

“Go get the boss while I check it out. Someone thinks they can mess with us and they're about to have a very bad day.”

One of the larger bandits flexed his muscles, dark, hard scales covering his body. Others picked up weapon or conjured them out of thin air, some wreathed in fire or sizzling with electric sparks. The one with the scales went inside and the others heard him crashing about.

“Dammit, there's another one dead in here,” he called out, then stormed back out of the room.

“Two of our guys are dead in there and none of you idiots saw or heard a thing. What is wrong with you idiots?”

“Neither did you!”

That earned the speaker a punch to the face.

“I said go get the boss, idiots.”

He pointed out one of the bandits.

“You, go get him. Everyone else search the town. Whoever did this is here somewhere, and roust everyone out while you’re at it.”

Seeing the images recorded from high above, Jason’s team watched as the bandits started turning over the town. They found no sign of their attacker beyond what had been left behind. Many of the buildings had dead bandits, usually from a slice across the throat or a stab wound to the back of the neck. Others looked like corpses left in the desert for weeks, their bodies dried out and rotted, when they had been seen walking around hours or even just minutes earlier.

They dragged the bodies out into the sandy dirt of the main street as they cleared the building one by one.

“Where’s Vargas?”

“I saw him go into that building over there.”

“Did you see him come out?”

The bandits began to realise that more of their number were going missing in the course of the search. They heard screams coming from one of the buildings and then one of their number came staggering out, looking more dead than alive. The big bandit with the scales rushed over and grabbed the man’s shoulders to keep him upright.

“Who was it?”

The man was barely able to cough out a response.

“Shadow... eye...”

They felt an ominous aura come from the building, along with an icy voice.

“Suffer the cost of your transgressions.”

The bandit holding the man up felt flesh soften under his fingers and he dropped the man as they watched his already corpse-like appearance fully rot in front of their eyes. The big man burst into the building, finding it empty.

The bandit’s leader emerged from the largest building in the town, formerly the only tavern before the bandit leader claimed it for himself. He had no shirt and was still pulling up his pants, eyes going wide at the pile of the bodies in the street. The remaining bandits, the better part of two dozen, assembled in front of him.

The leader loudly demanded to know what was going on and a dozen bandits all tried to talk at once, unnerved at finding almost a quarter of their number dead at the hands of unseen enemies.

“SHUT UP!” the leader bellowed and was about to make more demands when he looked behind the bandits assembling in front of him. Following his gaze, they all turned around to see four cloaked figures standing behind them in a line. One was a man in a cloak made of darkness and stars. Another looked to be made of darkness entirely. A third was wrapped head to foot in bloody rags, its hood and cloak made from dangling strips. The final figure was just a cloak with no wearer. All that was inside it was an eye, a little larger than a head, made of what looked like blue and orange fire. Two orbs drifted around the floating cloak, slightly smaller versions of the main eye.

The leader pushed his way forward through his men to stand in front of them. He guessed the man in the cloak was an actual person, the others having the looks of summons or familiars. The only aura he could sense from any of them was a bronze-rank aura from the figure made of bloody rags. Unsurprisingly, the sense he got from the aura was a blood drenched hunger.

“You killed my people?” the leader asked.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“So you would all gather in one place.”

“What for?”

“To kill the rest.”

The leader frowned. “You’re Adventure Society?”

“Yes.”

“They just said to kill us, instead of bringing us in, right?”

“Yes.”

The leader was worried by his inability to sense the man’s aura. If the man was a strong bronze-ranker, his bandit clan might be enough to kill him with numbers. If it was a silver ranker, they were all dead. Needing to know either way, he pressed his aura down on the man.

The aura that emerged to block it left him almost laughing in surprise.

“An iron ranker?” he asked, disbelievingly. “You really thought you could take us all out and you’re an iron ranker?”

“I still think that,” came the cold reply.

“Who do you think you are?”

“Jason Asano.”

Many of the bandits, formerly operating under Cole Silva, turned pale. They had all heard different stories but it was a fact that going after Asano had brought down Cole Silva and scattered his organisation into pieces. It was the very thing that brought many of them out into the veldt.

“Is that suppose to scare me?” The leader asked.

“No,” Jason said. “It’s meant to scare them, while they watch me kill you.”

The bandit sneered. He pressed his aura down on Jason’s but was startled to find he was throwing an egg against a rock. The sneer vanished as his aura was pushed back by a force that felt as inexorable as the dawning sun.

“Kill this fool!” the leader barked, but Jason’s aura flooded out and over the bandits. It clamped down onto each one, grinding their own auras into nothing. They were flooded with feelings of exposure and vulnerability, then something sharp pricked not against their bodies but their very souls. As if encased in a spiritual iron maiden, the bandits felt like any movement would leave them pained and punctured.

The big bandit with the scales mustered his courage and lunged in Jason’s direction, He immediately collapsed to the ground, letting out an alien, whistling shriek until suddenly he stopped. Laying on the ground, he looked like he was still screaming but was issuing no sound. His eyes were wide and watering, drenched in soul-deep fear. His whole body was rigid and trembling, as if caught in a seizure.

The bandit leader looked down at the fallen bandit, then the others. They were frozen in place, skin slick with cold sweat and eyes filled with terror. He turned back to Jason.

“You expect me to surrender?”

Jason turned his head to look at the corpse pinned to the wall, then back at the bandit.

“The contract has no terms of surrender.”

The bandit leader’s expression went hard, fierce eyes locked on Jason.

Jason’s perception power now included magical senses, which allowed him to detect the magic surging under his feet. He dodged aside as a thick stone spike burst from the ground in the spot where he had been standing. The spike then exploded, showering him in stone fragments. An army of short tendrils shot out from Jason’s shadow cloak, intercepting any that were about to strike him, and leaving him completely unharmed.

Ability: [Cloak of Night] (Dark)

- Conjunction (darkness, light, dimension).
- Base cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Conjures a magical cloak that can alter the wearer. Offers limited physical protection. Can generate light, or blend into shadows. Cloak can reduce the weight of the wearer for a low mana-per-second cost, allowing reduced falling speed and water walking. Cannot be given or taken away, although effects can be extended to others in very close proximity.

- Effect (bronze): Cloak reflexively intercepts projectiles. Highly effective against rapid, weaker attacks, but less effective against powerful, singular attacks. Cloak allows gliding for low mana-per-second. Weight reduction no longer costs mana unless affecting additional people.

Jason moved into the midst of the bandits, his movements light and quick, his cloak floating around him. The bandits didn't move, frozen by the sensation of knives against their soul and the memory of what happened to their fellow.

A rack of stag horns grew from the bandit leader's forehead and he barrelled through his own people to get at Jason. One was killed by the spearpoint horns of their leader, while another two were knocked away. They tried scrambling away but then screamed a moment before falling silent, like their fellow before them.

Jason and the leader fought amongst the other bandits like duellists in a statue garden. The leader was stronger and faster but Jason had learned to fight from Rufus Remore. Compared to that, the skills of a failed backwater adventurer were crude and buffoonish. He was all power and no finesse; if it weren't for his bronze-rank reflexes, the fight would have been laughable.

Colin and Gordon remained where they were, not moving to assist. Shade's three bodies, on the other hand, joined Jason and the bandit leader in dancing amongst the other bandits. Jason teleported between Shade's bodies to run rings around the bandit leader, dodging the powerful, but slow attacks. It bought him the space to cast a spell or let him reposition to make attacks of his own, dagger shooting forward in the grip of a shadow arm.

Not many of the bandits actually had aura powers. One of the ones who did had been biding her time and when she found herself behind Jason she pushed back against his aura and lunged at his back with her knife, imbued with electrical energy as she used an

essence power on it. The instant she moved, Jason aura crushed hers like a bug in a fist. She too collapsed to the ground, shrieking like the god of death had grabbed her.

Human essence users typically had a preponderance of special attacks and the bandit leader was no different. Many involved flinging fragments of earth over wide area, which the leader did to try and catch the fast moving Jason, He quickly realised this was pointless, the cloak absorbing the attacks with ease. The leader tried a variety of other approaches, from conjuring and throwing hammers to hurling stone spears. As Jason continued to dance around him, his legs transformed into stag's legs, increasing his agility. Chunks of stone erupted from the ground to encase his arms in battering rams and he sprung about on the stag legs, trying to catch and hammer down Jason.

Catching Jason still remained an elusive prospect. Every time he thought he had landed a blow, it turned out Jason had hidden his true position within his cloak, the blow coming close but hitting nothing.

Jason, in turn, had used a few spells at the beginning that seemed to do nothing, the bandit leader assuming they had failed due to rank disparity. Since then, all Jason could manage were superficial wounds from his dagger, which the leader derisively sneered at. It was hardly surprising that a stealth specialist couldn't truly harm a higher-ranker in open combat.

The bandit paid no mind to the tiny wounds as he struggled to pin Jason down. One good hit was all it would take. It took some time before he realised something was horribly wrong. He had an increasing sense of dread, then spotted the black veins under his skin.

"Poison," he spat, coming to a stop.

"Disease, actually," Jason said, doing likewise. "Not that it matters."

"You think this iron-rank crap is enough to take me down?"

"Yes."

As the bandit lunged, again, Jason once more disappeared into one of Shade's bodies, emerging at a distance from the shadow of one of the buildings. He was already chanting a spell.

"Suffer the cost of your transgressions."

The punishment spell withered the bandit leader's affliction-riddled body with necrosis, his muscle atrophying on the spot. He staggered in place even as Jason cast another spell.

"Feed me your sins."

Ability: [Feast of Absolution] (Sin)

- Spell (recovery, cleanse, holy).
- Base cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Cleanse all curses, diseases, poisons and unholy afflictions from a single target. Additionally cleanse all holy afflictions if the target is an ally. Recover stamina and mana for each affliction cleansed. This ability ignores any effect that prevents cleansing. Cannot target self.

- Effect (bronze): Enemies suffer an instance each of [Penance] and [Legacy of Sin] for each condition cleansed from them.

- [Penance] (affliction, holy, damage-over-time, stacking): Deals ongoing transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, dropping off as damage is dealt.

- [Legacy of Sin] (affliction, holy, stacking): You are considered more damaged for the purposes of execute ability damage scaling. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

The bandit leader's life force became visible, shining from within his body. It was tainted with afflictions, marked in swirls of bruise colours; ugly shades of yellow, purple and red. The taint streamed out of the bandit leader life force and into Jason's outstretched hand. What it left behind was shining light of gold, silver blue, sinking back into the bandit's body with his life force and lighting him up from within, shining through his skin. The transcendent light started rapidly eating away at his already stricken body as the bandit leader started to scream.

Jason cast one more spell, to finish the job.

"Mine is the judgement, and the judgement is death."

More transcendent light appeared, hammering down from above like a deity's wrath. The leader's crippled body was entirely eradicated and Jason turned his attention to the remaining bandits.

"You aren't going to just kill us, right?" one of them asked, voice strained with panic.

Jason looked round the little town, seeing the people the bandits had taken as slaves, watching from hiding. His eyes once again fell on the corpse pinned to the wall.

"How many innocent people have you killed?" Jason asked. "There are adventurers heading north, even as we speak, to bring back the people you sold into slavery. In the face of that, you ask for mercy? If I took you back to the city, they would just kill you there."

Horror filled their faces as they realised they were about to die. The bandits started scattering, in spite of the fear Jason's aura suppression was still inflicting. The results were the same as those who had gone before as they all immediately collapsed, screaming with a pain unlike anything they had ever known before going silent, like the others.

Jason looked over them writhing on the ground and took a shuddering breath. He had killed before, quite a lot now. This would be his first execution. He was troubled by how little that prospect troubled him.

"Colin," he said flatly. "Feed."

Still standing by, Colin suddenly exploded like a bomb had hit him, raining leeches down onto the bandits. Caught up in Jason's soul attack, none of them screamed until Colin's afflictions claimed their lives.

Jason stood in the middle of the dead bandits, held his arms out to his side and chanted a spell.

"As your lives were mine to reap, your deaths are mine to harvest."

Ability: [Blood Harvest] (Blood)

- Spell (drain).
- Base cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Drain the remnant life force of a recently deceased body, replenishing health, stamina and mana. Only affects targets with blood.

- Effect (bronze): Affects any number of bodies in a wide area.

Using their remote viewing crystal, the team watched as blood red life force streamed out of the bodies and into Jason. From above, he looked like a spider at the centre of a bloody web.

"Now, I'm not looking to give no offence," their guide said, "but your man there seems worse than the folk he was sent after."

"An opinion you'll keep to yourself," Humphrey said sharply, although his eyes didn't waver from the projection. "If I hear you say that where he can hear it, you'll be answering to me."

"Oh, don't worry on that account," the man said. "He's going to find everyone real polite."

Chapter 218

Inherently Corrupting

The ordinary people left in the town weren't inclined to come out after Jason's display. From their perspective, the shadowy figure with the monstrous companions was demonstrably more dangerous than the bandits. Jason left, leaving the heroic-looking Humphrey and their local guide to come in and play rescuer.

There was a floating barge coming to take the townsfolk away. It moved slower than the skimmer they had arrived in and would be waiting in another town for word of the all clear. Jason volunteered to go and bring back the barge.

"You've done your part," Humphrey told him. "Clive can go back in the skimmer."

"I'd like to do it," Jason told him. "I could use a ride to clear my head."

"At least take someone with you. Sophie isn't the exactly the sensitive rescuing type."

"What I'm looking for is some solitude, Humphrey. Some time to settle myself after..."

Jason looked over at the remains of the bandits, not finishing the sentence.

In horse form, Shade at full gallop was no slower than the skimmer and just as tireless. The midnight horse with glowing white eyes, hooves and mane sped across the grassy flatland of the veldt, leaving behind a trail of white mist, rising off the hooves. Shade's horse form was made of shadow-stuff, rather than flesh and bone, and had a similar feel to the soft cloud-substance that made up Jason's cloud house. It made for a smooth, comfortable ride.

He reached the town that was being used as a base of operations for the Adventure Society. It had turned out that the criminals coming from Greenstone had set up a number of bandit operations and Jason had only wiped out one of several groups. More teams like Jason's had been dispatched to key areas while the Adventure Society set up an operations hub. Jason went inside and reported that his team had been successful to the silver-ranker in charge, someone he hadn't met before.

The Adventure Society wasn't just going to leave the people Jason had liberated in a town full of the dead, so the barge was sent off. Jason made his way onto the roof, sitting down to quietly meditate as the hovering vehicle smoothly made its way across the veldt.

Jason's meditation was uneasy. He had become accustomed to his life being one of violence and he felt largely untouched by it anymore. This was a source of concern, since while it was useful, he worried about losing his humanity. He was, after all, no longer human.

Each time he killed people, rather than monsters, he thought back to his first night in his new world and his conversation with Rufus. Every time, he felt more and more separate from the man who wondered if his innocence was a worthwhile price for power.

Meditation had long been one of Jason's key coping mechanisms. After his encounter with the star seed, he had a much stronger sense of his own soul, which made meditation a very different experience. It was more involved, more controlled; a journey through an inner world.

He began by guiding his thoughts and feelings away, placing his mind and soul into a state of perfect stillness. His sense of his surroundings was somehow both heightened yet pushed aside, not intruding as he cultivated an inner peace.

In the past, his deepest meditative state had felt like a vast, still emptiness. Now he was able to sense things within that inner space. There was the comforting presence of his familiars, residing in his soul. As he reached a state of stillness and calm, he felt them do likewise. Over time he had come to feel the symbiosis between them much more clearly.

Within his soul he opened his eyes and was standing in a garden, lit up by the sun, shining in a blue sky. The plant beds were his powers, flowering in shades of red, white and black. The flowers of his bronze-rank powers had grown to fill their space, unable to grow further until the garden was enlarged.

The borders of the garden were marked by a high fortress wall of dark stone. There was damage, as if they had been besieged, but the gaps were filled with black metal, as if the damage had uncovered something stronger and stranger. The metal was polished mirror smooth, dark and reflective with a eerie and fathomless feel to it. It was easy to sense that it was much harder than the stone of the original construction, which it made seem like a façade, daring an invader to strip it away.

Jason walked through the gardens, letting his finger touch the flower petals. When he first began his training, Rufus had told Jason of the three pillars of effective advancement: training, practise and consolidation. At the time he had simply trusted Rufus' word, training his body and skills, then using them in combat and using meditation to make the most of his gains, using them to build a foundation and grow his power upon it.

Now, Jason had a much better sense of that process. Above his head, unconsolidated power shimmered like a heat haze. He could feel it, shaped by his training and stimulated by combat. He drew that power down and fed it into the garden beds, fertiliser to be soaked up by the roots of his powers. He worked carefully, methodically, always respecting the power and never acting with haste. He cultivated the garden to grow well, rather than quickly, and grow it did.

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- Ability [Path of Shadows] (Dark) has reached Iron 9 (100%).
 - Ability [Path of Shadows] (Dark) has reached Bronze 0 (00%).

 - Ability [Path of Shadows] (Dark) has gained a new effect.
 - Ability [Path of Shadows] (Dark) has changed from [Special Ability] to [Special Ability/Conjuration]. The type for any given use of the ability is based on the effect.
 - Ability [Path of Shadows] (Dark) has gained the [Darkness] subtype.
 - Base cost of ability [Path of Shadows] (Dark) has changed from [Low] to [Varies].
 - Cooldown of ability [Path of Shadows] (Dark) has changed from [None] to [Varies].

Ability: [Path of Shadows] (Dark)

- Special Ability/Conjuration (dimension, teleport, darkness).
- Base cost: Varies.
- Cooldown: Varies.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Teleport using shadows as a portal. You must be able to see the destination shadow. This effect is a special ability with a low mana cost and no cooldown.

- Effect (bronze): You can sense nearby shadows and teleport to them without requiring line of sight. By increasing the cost to moderate, small shadows can be enlarged to serve as viable portals at both the ingress and egress points. Alternatively, conjure a shadow gate between two locations on a regional scale. The distant gate must appear in a location you have previously visited. This effect is a conjuration with a very high mana cost and a 10 minute cooldown. The iron-rank effect can still be used while this ability is on cooldown.

With his new awareness and more controlled advancement, an ability transitioning to bronze was a different experience to what he had gone through in the past. The advancement of his perception power had been unpleasant, painful and disorienting. This time he slowed and guided the process, making it painless, smooth and invigorating.

“Very impressive,” Arabelle said and Jason’s eyes snapped open. In spite of his aura senses being heightened by his meditation, he had not sensed her approach at all. Of course, if a gold ranker with even basic aura control wanted to avoid his senses, they could. He still couldn’t detect her presence with his aura senses, which was a little off-putting while looking right at her. It made her seem illusory and unreal.

She was standing casually at the edge of the barge roof, looking down at him, still sat in a meditative pose.

“You’re not here as part of the barge team,” Jason said. “You’ve been hiding. From me.”

“Yes,” she said. “I couldn’t help but tell you how impressed I am, though. Most people reach bronze or even or silver before they can self-guide their advancement like that.”

“You could see that?”

“I can see your soul, Jason.”

“Because that’s not ominous at all.”

She gave him a warm smile.

“I can see the scars on your soul,” she said. “More clearly than the ones on your body, even if you were standing naked before me.”

“Best not,” Jason said. “A bloke can’t go around doing funny business with his mate’s Mum.”

She let out an easy laugh.

“Aren’t you going to ask me what I’m doing here?” she asked.

“People wanted to make sure nothing happened to me again,” Jason said.

“And that you weren’t doing anything foolish,” she added. “I almost intervened when you convinced your team to let you face the bandits alone.”

“They have faith in me.”

“I heard you didn’t care much for faith.”

“Yeah, but you use what you’ve got,” Jason said.

“That’s an interesting choice of words,” Arabelle said. “You said ‘use.’ These are your friends and companions we’re talking about. You use them?”

“Manipulation is just a tool,” Jason said. “Like killing. Dangerous when used inappropriately, but sometimes it’s the right choice, even when people look down on you for it.”

“And you wanted to manipulate them into letting you do the killing. Why is that?”

“Slaughtering some thirty-odd people isn’t a small thing, even if you’ve killed before, which not all of the others have.”

“But it’s alright for you to do it alone?”

“I’ve been working my way up. I’m alright with it.”

“Do you expect me to believe that?” she asked.

“No.”

“Good, because we will be talking about this again. Just not on the rooftop of a barge, a hundred miles from a decent cup of tea.”

“I have some iced tea, if that interests you.”

“Really?”

Jason hopped lightly to his feet and took a pair of tall glasses filled with fruit-flavoured ice tea, the chunk of ice in each clinking against the glass.

“Thanks,” Arabelle said, taking the proffered glass and sipping at the paper straw.

“That’s a good straw,” she said.

“I know a guy with the paper essence,” Jason said as they sat on the edge of the roof, their legs hanging over the side. “Mostly he works in publishing but I’ve been talking him into some side projects. Ever had a drink with a tiny umbrella in it?”

“Why would a drink have a tiny umbrella?”

“It makes it better.”

“How?”

“It’s a kind of magic from my world.”

“I thought your world didn’t have magic.”

“That’s why we have to get creative. There’s a magician in my world who made a Ninety metre statue vanish and reappear, right in front of people. It’s probably the most famous statue on the whole planet. It’s called Liberty Enlightening the World, which ultimately proved a bit ironic.”

“How can someone be a magician in a world without magic?”

“With misdirection and deceit, which aren’t inherently bad. They can be used to entertain and delight. It’s just that people can also use them for untoward ends, because there’s money and power in it. Let me tell you, politics in this world is child’s play. In my world, everyone has a recording crystal device and no one has magic. Even the most ignorant, at least in my homeland, just have a better idea of how it all works. No inherent hierarchies of power. You have to build them yourself, or be born into them.”

“That’s why you are so dismissive of them,” Arabelle said.

“That, and they shaft people over.”

“It sounds fertile soil for corruption,” Arabelle said.

“There’s no such thing as an incorruptible system. All you can do is your best to make it less crappy.”

“What about if a god was running it? Who could influence a god to corrupt them?”

“I’ll refer that question to the church of Purity,” Jason said.

Arabelle scowled.

“I don’t like what’s happening there,” she said. “Why would Purity throw his followers in with these cultists. They’re defilers.”

“You don’t have to tell me,” Jason said. “I’ve got the scars on my soul to prove it.”

“Yes, your soul is almost unrecognisable from when we first met. Actual, aura-changing events are rare and you’ve had three in a series of months. It’s probably for the best that you have that personal crest, because between the changes and your anti-tracking ability, trying to identify you from your aura without it would be an unreliable prospect.”

“The changes aren’t completely bereft of benefits,” Jason said.

“Yes, your ability to suppress auras and attack souls is impressive in action,” she said. “At iron-rank, only those with highly trained aura control or an ability to counter aura suppression will be able to stand up to you. That said, don’t go thinking you could do to the likes of Humphrey or your friend Valdis what you did to a bunch of untrained dregs. You should keep in mind all the elite adventurers who assembled for Emir’s event. They are your contemporaries, not these locals.”

“I’m aware,” Jason said. “We sparred with some great teams and they handed back out butts in a box on the regular.”

“I recommend you practice your aura control with your team mates,” Arabelle said. “It’s hard to find people you can trust to do suppression and anti-suppression drills with.”

“I’m wary of that,” Jason said. “When I first gained the power to use soul attacks, I told myself I wouldn’t if I didn’t have to. Of course, that didn’t last long. It’s almost as if power were inherently corrupting.”

“We can discuss that at length, later,” Arabelle said.

“There may not be time for that,” Jason said. “The ability I’ve been waiting on was the one that just reached bronze. It’s time to start trying to get into the astral space in earnest.”

When the sand barge arrived, the Adventure Society officials on board took over from Jason’s team in managing the rescued people. The team gathered around Jason, obviously worried.

“I’m fine,” he assured them, not mentioning Arabelle’s presence in the veldt. If she wanted to remain hidden, he wasn’t going to spoil it.

As his team prepared to return to Greenstone via the skimmer they had rode out on, Jason tested his newly bronze-rank power. Jason waved his hand and a line of substantive shadows appeared on the ground, dancing like dark flames. Then an archway rose up out of it, made from what looked like of a whole piece of polished obsidian. The dark fire then rose up to fill the arch.

“That looks an awful lot like the shadow gates in the Order of the Reaper’s astral space,” Humphrey said, then looked to Jason and Clive. “Something neither of you seem surprised about.”

“I had an inkling,” Jason said. “Shade has seen that power before.”

“What aren’t you telling us?” Humphrey asked.

“That’s a conversation for later,” Jason said.

“Where does the gate go?” Clive asked.

“Back to the town where the Adventure Society set up their management hub.”

Jason squared his shoulders before walking through, emerging in the middle of the town’s main street. The sensation was very familiar to him; a disembodied sensation of movement, as if the world was turning around him. It was more intense than his usual shadow jumps, but he had experienced it a number of times now, with Hester’s portals.

A number of people were looking at him, having seen the archway rise up out of the ground. Sophie came through the portal after him, then Clive. He lacked the astral affinity that made portal travel more of an exhilarating rush than stomach-churning lurch.

“Alright, test over,” Jason said. “Back we go.”

“Give me a moment,” Clive groaned.

On the way back to the city they experimented with the power, finding three major limitations. One was distance. As best they could tell, the range was around forty kilometres. Clive’s told Jason that was normal for a portal ability and he could expect it to rapidly improve. It would increase by it’s current range at each minor threshold of advancement, meaning that by the time it reached the peak of bronze rank, it would have ten times the range.

The next second limitation was capacity. Ten iron-rankers or one bronze ranker could pass through the gate in either direction before the power was consumed. One iron ranker would be able to pass through and come back five times before the gate was depleted.

They were able to talk a bronze-ranker they encountered on the way back into testing it, but could not find enough regular people willing to walk through the sinister magic archway for testing purposes. Suggesting that the ones who were up for it go through and back multiple times resulted in the few they could find backing out. It was at that point that Belinda asked the obvious question.

“Why not just ask your interface power?”

Jason and Clive looked at each other, then shared a nod.

Help: Ability limitations, [Path of Shadows] (Dark).

- Capacity (Bronze 0): 1 bronze-rank, living entity. Alternatively, 10 iron-rank instead of 1 bronze, and 10 normal-rank instead of 1 iron-rank.
- Capacity is reduced by taking large amounts of non-living material through, either directly or in dimensional bags. Items in dimensional storage generated by personal powers do not count against the capacity.
- Range (Bronze 0): 40 kilometres. Destination must have been previously visited, before or after obtaining this ability.

“That was deliberate,” Jason said.

“We wanted to field-test the power with unbiased views before looking to the interface,” Clive added.

“You forgot the blindingly obvious thing, didn’t you?” Belinda asked.

“Yes,” Clive said immediately. “Yes we did.”

“Seriously, Clive?” Jason asked. “You folded like an origami swan you have to put somewhere without throwing it away for long enough that the person who made it for you won’t get offended when you finally throw it out and claim the humidity made it fall over or something.”

“That was very specific,” Sophie said.

“Completely hypothetical,” Jason asserted firmly.

“What’s origami?” Neil asked.

After getting back to the city, Clive and Jason told the team about the idea of going back into the Order of the Reaper’s astral space.

“There are no guarantees,” Clive said. “Jason’s ability doesn’t say anything about breaching dimensional barriers. That means we have no idea if we can get it to work, or how long it will take to figure that out. I’ll be going to stay with Emir’s team at Sky Scar Lake to work on the issue and Jason will be portalling in every day so we can do a series of tests.”

“In the meantime,” Jason suggested, “those of us who planned to work at the training centre being set up should do just that. We can also use this time to decide, as a team, if going back to the astral space is something we want to do. We have no idea how many unknown dangers we would face, so even if we can go back, it doesn’t mean that we should.”

Chapter 219

Beholden to No One

One of the ways Jason had made positive use of his recovery time was to get himself back into a training pattern. Rufus, Gary and Farrah had worked to instil good habits during his initial training, but the eventful life of an adventurer inevitably led to him letting things slide.

Rufus, Gary and Jason's team had often felt helpless at their inability to help Jason after his ordeal. They were forced to leave things in the hands of first Carlos and then Arabelle, who had the experience and expertise to give Jason the help he needed. When Jason expressed a desire to reformulate his training habits, then, they leapt at the chance to be useful.

The regimented training schedule also helped them maximise their own efforts, whether that was learning and developing their powers like Belinda, or making the final push toward bronze, like Humphrey and Jason.

After Clive, Humphrey was the closest to reaching the bronze-rank threshold. Like the others, he had powers to raise from scratch after completing his power set, but being a human meant his powers increased slightly, but measurably faster than Jason's, Neil's or Sophie's. He followed Clive in drawing back from the training until they knew if they would need to stay at iron to return to the astral space.

Clive had decamped for Sky Scar Lake, living in Emir's cloud palace and working with his people. Many were more experienced than Clive, even in his specialty field of astral magic, yet Clive's insightful thinking and prodigious capacity for learning never failed to impress. It was all the more so since he had gained the ability to learn the mundane things through skill books, leaving his mind free to tackle the esoterica.

Jason practiced his portal ability, visiting the domes at the bottom of the lake every day. He couldn't advance it, but aiming the portal over vast distances was a skill he worked on developing. It required a level of visualisation that made it tricky to target places he did not know very well. The ability to distinguish places in his mind with landmarks was very helpful.

The distance between Greenstone and Sky Scar Lake meant that it took Jason an hour to get there by opening a portal at his maximum distance, going through, then waiting for the ten minute cooldown before going again. To accomplish this, he first had to cross the desert in between, finding landmarks he could remember well enough to use as

waypoints. For that journey, Shade had transformed not into a horse, but a giant sand lizard to stride across the desert sands.

Each day on his arrival, he would meet with Clive and Emir's people to go over the ritual configurations they had devised. The end goal was to use his power to reopen the portal, but they were not yet at the point where they expected that to work. The astral magic involved, like that used by the Builder cult, was incredibly advanced. The astral magic theory that Knowledge had given to Jason, who then shared it with Clive, was proving invaluable.

Jason did his best to follow along with Clive's explanations as they worked. He learned a lot but it was largely above his head, even with all the magical theory he'd been studying. This was the new cutting edge of astral magic theory.

Jason frequently felt that his presence was superfluous beyond being a wand to produce the right kind of portal. The true collaborator was Shade, who was an endless source of fascination for Clive and Emir's people. His insights drove their work forward, until they declared that it was no longer a matter of if they could access the astral space, but when.

"What do you think of all this?" Jason asked Shade, after they'd been visiting the site for a week. "Does it annoy you to be dragged off every day to constantly answer questions?"

"Just the opposite," Shade assured him. "I first became a familiar to have more experiences than can be had in the bleak void of the Reaper's realm. Being affixed within the astral space for centuries left me rather desirous of company. A group of intelligent people eager to hear everything I have to say has been entirely satisfactory."

"I'm glad. I'm also glad that you decided to re-up after I went and got you killed fighting that elemental."

"My only regret is that it kept me from offering my support during your recent tribulation."

From within his soul, Jason could sense a surge of feelings from Gordon, reflecting Shade's sentiment.

"Well, I'm glad," Jason said. "As much as I would have appreciated the support, I don't know what would have happened to you if that thing had gotten into my soul."

"We would have been annihilated," Shade said. "Our true, spiritual selves, not just the vessel. Star seeds are quite destructive to familiars. I have heard of them breaking the connection of a bonded familiar, too, although summoned familiars suffer the worst of it."

While Clive worked on getting access to the astral space, Jason kept pushing off any actual discussion of whether they should go in once he did. His team largely felt that it was a pointless question with an obvious answer, confused by Jason's evasiveness.

He dodged the discussion until finally calling the group together, including Clive who was portalled back to the city by Hester. They met on the deck of the houseboat, where Jason had put on an impressive lunch spread of spring salads and ingredients to build sandwich wraps. They were sat around a long table, talking as they ate.

"Why have you been putting this off?" Sophie asked. "I don't think there are going to be any surprises, here. We all want in on this astral space."

"It should be you and I, at the very least," Clive told Jason. "As we continue to unravel how the seal on the astral space works, we've confirmed that only iron-rankers will be able to get in and we don't know if there will be problems getting back out. Your portal ability may well be necessary, and I'm the only iron-ranker with the requisite knowledge of the seal."

Jason turned to Sophie.

"I was waiting for you," he told her.

"Me? I've been bugging you about this for two weeks. Why would you be waiting for me?"

Jason took a thick document envelope from his inventory and handed it over. She frowned as she opened it up and pulled out the contents.

"This is my indenture contract," she said, looking over the first page.

"Yes," Jason said. "The contract expired today."

"It finished?" Sophie asked, surprised. "Honestly, I haven't even thought about it since..."

She trailed off, looking at Jason apologetically.

"Since I was taken and you didn't know who would end up with it if I died," Jason finished.

"Sorry," she said.

"No," Jason said. "You don't owe me an apology for having a reasonable concern. But now, you're free. Completely. Beholden to no one but yourself. From today onward, you are a member of this team for no more reason than you want to be."

He flashed her a grin.

"Welcome to the team, adventurer," he said and rest of the team echoed Jason's congratulations. Humphrey then apologised after giving her a clap on the shoulder that

made her grunt with pain. His strength-enhancing power had reached bronze and he was still getting a handle on his increased might.

As Sophie looked around at the sincere, smiling faces she made a rare bashful expression.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

Brash young adventurers moved into one of the Adventure Society’s instruction halls. It was remarkably similar to a lecture hall from Jason’s world, complete with a projector screen on the wall behind the lectern to display images from recording crystals. Traditionally there had been little formalised instruction in Greenstone, with Danielle Geller and Elspeth Arella’s joint initiative a very new development. The sudden increase in demand for venues was something that was still being sorted out.

Some of the adventurers were nervous, quietly taking their seats, while others were brash and overconfident, lounging back with their feet over the seat in front of them. They ranged from their mid teen through their early twenties, many older than normal iron rankers because they only just received the chance to be essence users.

“Is this Asano guy even qualified to teach us?” someone asked. “He’s been an adventurer for what? A week?”

“A lot of us have been adventurers for literally a week,” a young woman said. “I’ll take any good advice I can get.”

“No, he’s right,” another guy said. “This is just another example of favouritism. They give the good trainers to the big name families and leave some nothing guy for us.”

“The big families don’t need this training, idiot. This whole thing is for people like us.”

“Which is why some iron-ranker to teach us. How is that guy’s aura any better than ours?”

“That’s easy,” a powerful, confident voice came into the room, followed by it’s owner. He was tall and handsome, broad shouldered and walking in through a side door with easy confidence to stand next to the lectern. “Jason has had excellent training and some experiences I don’t wish on any of you. For those who don’t know me, my name is Humphrey Geller. You may have heard of my family, or perhaps just my mother, Danielle. I’m here to assist Jason, as well as make sure he doesn’t do anything too outrageous. If you want a more specific example of his qualifications, then I’m sure you all heard about the aura blast incident in Marina North. Some of you may have even experienced it for yourself.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” someone called out. “We aren’t exactly the pleasure yacht crowd.”

“That was Asano?” someone else asked.

“It was,” Humphrey said.

“Can’t you just teach us instead?” someone called out.

“I’ve only been asked to assist,” Humphrey said. “Also, to make sure he doesn’t get carried away.”

“Carried away?” someone asked. “How would he get carried away?”

“Well, you never can be sure, with Jason. There’s a chance he might try and recruit you into some kind of underground movement and overthrow the existing political structures. Or a sandwich business.”

“That’s sounds very far-fetched,” someone said.

“Yes, but I’ve found that assuming Jason won’t do something just because its crazy or impossible is not a sensible approach.”

“You aren’t concerned about undermining his authority, here?” the same person asked.

“Jason has his own way of doing things, and he can establish his own authority once he comes on stage.”

“What’s he like?” a girl asked hesitantly. “I’ve heard some stories that almost made me stay home.”

“He’s sneaky,” Humphrey said.

“Sneaky?” the girl asked.

“That seems harsh,” the previous person said. “I’ve heard he’s very handsome.”

“I didn’t hear that,” someone else said.

“Me either.”

“I’ve picked a lot of stories about him and that never came up.”

“I’ve seen his face in recordings and it’s kind of pointy. Especially the chin.”

“He’s started wearing a beard,” Humphrey said. “What I meant by sneaky is that he’s the kind of person that, after agreeing to teach a group of new adventurers, would mix in with them and start bad mouthing himself to see how people reacted.”

Most of the group looked confused, while the ones quicker on the uptake turned to the man who had started the conversation.

“Seriously?” the man they were all looking at said. “There’s nothing wrong with my chin.”

Jason stood up and walked down to the front of the stage. As he went, his loosely controlled aura grew tighter and stronger, transforming from a weak, glob of power into an unyielding steel sphere.

“Aura disguise,” he said, turning around to face the group, “is an advanced technique beyond the scope of this foundational course. To be honest, I’ve only just started to learn it myself. What we’ll be going over are the basics. Projection, retraction, suppression. Mastery of these three things will have a transformative effect on your adventuring career.”

“Even I know those are the basics,” someone called out. “If that’s all you’re going to teach us, what good is all this.”

Jason panned a predatory grin over the group like he was sweeping them with a laser.

“You should all be able to sense the auras in this room. Look at all of you, and then look at Humphrey and myself.”

He waited a moment, then pointed at the nervous girl from earlier.

“What’s your name?”

“Janice.”

“Alright, Janice. How do mine and Humphrey’s auras feel compared to everyone else’s?”

“They’re solid,” Janice said. “They don’t fluctuate.”

“And what do you think when you sense an aura like that? Don’t think about it now, just say the first thing that pops into your head. When you sense an aura like ours on someone, what is your first thought about that person?”

“That they know what they’re doing.”

Jason pointed at Janice again with an approving gesture.

“Exactly, thank you, Janice. You sense someone with their aura under tight control and they seem to know what they’re doing. That is your foot in the door. If you want to be respected in this business, then that is your first step. If you’re looking to find yourself with a big name, standing next to a Cavendish or...”

He gestured at Humphrey.

“...a Geller, then you need to realise that your aura is the first thing another adventurer will know about you. If your aura control is sloppy, it will also be the last thing. If you get a contract, one of the juicy one with the extra incentives, and you turn up to meet the client and he can see through you like a window, then you’ll find those contracts drying up.”

“Obviously,” Humphrey took over, “there is a lot more to being an adventurer than just putting up a good front. But if you can’t manage even that, then you may never get a chance to show what else you can do.”

“That isn’t all aura control is good for,” Jason said. “But it’s important, and they don’t always tell you what’s important when you’re starting at the bottom, do they?”

“Damn right, they don’t,” someone called out.

“Well, you have us, now,” Jason said. “We’re here to teach you how to use your aura, and maybe you’ll pick up a few tricks along the way that the big boys have been keeping to themselves.”

“We’ll be starting with projection,” Humphrey said. “It’s the most basic form of aura control and the easiest to learn.”

“It’s also, arguably, the most important,” Jason added. “Not only does it determine how the adventuring world will look at you, but good projection control will better equip you to resist suppression.”

“Is that such a big deal?” someone asked.

“It is,” Jason said. “Over the course of this program, you will all experience having your auras fully suppressed. Good aura projection makes suppressing your aura that much harder.”

“I’m sure you all heard about the recent bandit issues,” Humphrey said.

“We had the chance to see one of the bandit camps subdued almost entirely by someone using their aura,” Jason stepped in. “Those bandits all had auras like yours are now. If they had had the training that we’re going to impart, that wouldn’t have been possible, not on more than twenty at once.”

“Then why didn’t they send that person to teach us?” someone called out. Humphrey turned to look at Jason.

“They did,” Humphrey said.

Chapter 220

Evil Detector

Jason sat on the roof of his houseboat, cross-legged, with the rest of his team sitting around him. They all had their eyes closed, concentrating on forcefully projecting their auras. His team all pushed against Jason, while he pushed back in turn.

Humphrey, Neil and Clive had the most training and experience with aura control and their projections were stable and consistent. Their auras didn't fluctuate, revealing no weaknesses as they tackled Jason's unyielding aura head on.

Sophie and Belinda were less practised and less polished. They had taken on all of the guidance of their team mates, but their were so many things they had to learn and do as adventurers that they simply didn't have the time and experience spent on it that the others had. Jason's aura inundated theirs, seeking out any flaw or inconsistency and pressing against it until they rectified it and pushed back.

They continued the exercise for hours until all but Jason started to flag, falling back onto the soft, cloud-stuff rooftop in exhaustion. After Jason produced snacks and drinks on trays, the team sat back up to voraciously dug in.

"I used a lot of magical ingredients with these," he said. "They should replenish you just as effectively as spirit coins, but with a better taste."

"I like the taste of spirit coins," Neil said. "I like that tingly feeling on your tongue."

"Really?" Clive said. "I can't stand it".

"How are you not tired?" Belinda asked Jason. "I don't think I could stand up right now but you were holding all of us off and you look fine."

"Aura projection is about the soul," Jason said. "It's difficult to differentiate the mind and the soul, and if you put too much of your mind into it, your mind will become strained. The soul, by contrast, and so far as I can tell, is inexhaustible. I don't know if it's some wellspring of power hidden within us or if it's connected to the astral somehow and draws strength from there. Clive might no better than me."

"No idea," Clive said. "The soul is a mysterious thing and experimenting on it is the taboo of taboos. Not to say there aren't people running unethical projects on the quiet, but the Magic Society and the Adventure Society are always on the lookout for things like that. Not to mention the churches. If you want one issue that unites people across religions, see how quickly they team up to go after someone doing soul experiments."

"The trick," Jason said, "is to make the aura control come not from the mind, but the soul. The meditation techniques help, but I realise that distinguishing mind from soul is not

easy. I became much more consciously aware of my soul after being forced to retreat into it when the star seed took over my body. During our meditation training, I've been working with Humphrey and Neil to try and help them make the distinction without going through what I did. Having a solid foundation of aura control is a gateway to that, which is the point of today's exercise. When you're stronger, I'll try and help you the same way."

"It's good to have you here for this," Humphrey said to Clive. "We've been missing you while you've been off with Emir."

"There's a meeting today to update about the anti-Builder cult operations," Clive said. "They've been having them regularly since we found out about the cult and the star seeds, and I've been a part of that since I was the one who figured out it was the Builder. Today they want me to bring Jason. The focus right now is on the cultists we think are in the Order of the Reaper's astral space, and Shade's input will be invaluable. Not to mention that he's the one who'll be getting us in."

"I think saying that is a bit much," Jason said. "There have been people working on that for months, now, where I just show up once a day to knock out my power a few times and see what happens. If something happened to me, you could just go find someone with the same power and have them portalled in."

"That's true," Clive said. "You are at the perfect stage for what we need, though. Your power is at bronze rank, therefore usable to us, but you aren't, so you can go through the portal once it's opened. Your presence may be necessary to getting back out, we can't be sure. It could well be that once we're there, we can just leave without issues."

Jason and Clive were making their way through the streets of the island, each riding on a shadow horse.

"I have a rather important request, Mr Asano, if you are willing to hear me out," Shade said. Jason had long ago stopped trying to get Shade to use his first name.

"Of course," Jason said. "Request away."

"This is not a small matter," Shade said. "It is in regards to the flesh abominations in the astral space. The former Reaper acolytes affected by the Vorger."

"There are probably a few there now who used to be adventurers," Clive added.

"Indeed there are," Shade said. "Fourteen, as of the time the trials ended. I have no knowledge beyond that, as my purpose had been served and I was released back into the astral."

"What about them?" Jason asked.

“If you are going to be revisiting the astral space,” Shade said, “I would request that you hunt them all down and kill them. These were people who venerated the Reaper, whose most core value is the finality of death. They are trapped in an inaccessible realm, inside prisons of unaging flesh. If we have the chance, I would like to release them.”

Jason frowned.

“I know what it’s like to be trapped inside a body taken over by outside forces,” he said. “Our priority has to be to deal with the Builder cult and we will have to assess the situation once we’re there. Once we make sure the astral space is out of the Builder’s hands, I’ll do everything I can to help them. I’m sure the rest of the team will feel the same.”

“Of course we will,” Clive said.

“Thank you,” Shade said.

“My concern would be finding them all,” Jason said. “It’s a big city.”

“A soul compass,” Clive said. “They operate on the same principals as the tracking stones the Adventure Society uses on its members. Instead of tracking a specific aura signature, we can make one that will point at anything. We just filter out ourselves and the motive spirit false souls that monsters have and anything it points at will be either a cultist or one of the abominations. Providing there aren’t any natural creatures in the astral space.”

“There are not,” Shade said. “The plant life is natural, if frequently magical. There are no animals or normal people, however.”

“Sounds like a plan, then,” Jason said.

They were far from the only ones out on the streets, and they were passing by a busy eatery when Jason suddenly pulled up the shadow horse. Jason turned his head to peer intensely at the building, then dismounted.

“Jason,” Clive said, pulling to a halt himself. “We don’t have time for you to go exploring some new kind of sack.”

“It isn’t that,” Jason said. Clive’s expression went serious as he heard Jason’s voice. It was the icy tone he used for enemies.

Jason strode past the outdoor dining tables and into the busy shop, clearing a space with an aura projection that sent people rushing to get out of his way. He stopped in front of an ordinary man Clive didn’t recognise. The man had an iron-rank aura and looked nervous, but Clive didn’t find that surprising. It would be more strange if someone had Jason’s aura hovering over them like an executioner’s axe and looked perfectly calm.

“What do you want?” the man asked uncertainly.

“You’re coming with me,” Jason said.

“What are you talking about? What is happening?”

Clive had the same question but knew better than to voice it aloud.

“You know who I am,” Jason said. “You can feel it can’t you? Just like I can feel who you are. What you are.”

Clive watched the man’s feigned confusion give way to angry contempt.

“We will kill you, Rejector,” the man spat at Jason and Clive sensed a huge power suddenly swell within the man’s body. Jason’s aura came crashing down, shredding the man’s aura and clamping down on the power, squashing it into nothing. The man’s eyes went wide, his face stricken.

“How.. you can’t... that isn’t possible!”

“Now I’m the confused one,” Clive said.

“You know the Magic Society has been looking for a way to find star seeds without an extensive ritual?” Jason asked. “It looks like I’m it. I’ve locked down his soul so he can’t detonate it and kill himself. I bet we can find some people at the Adventure Society who would like to have a long conversation with this guy.”

The attempts to find a way to prevent Builder cultists from killing themselves when exposed had limited success. The Magic Society had developed a suppression collar variant that could, in theory, prevent the explosive function from triggering, but in the time it took to activate, the seed would complete its activation to explode as normal.

Jason’s aura senses were stronger than before his ordeal, but still not as strong as Sophie’s with her aura sensing power. He had an intimate understanding of the Builder’s star seeds, however, and sensed the subtle affect it had on that of the secret cultist. Aura suppression alone would not have been enough to prevent the seed being triggered. Jason’s unusual power to attack the soul directly was able to disrupt the trigger and prevent the seed from exploding into a crystal star. By holding the man’s soul in a vice with his aura, Jason was able to take him to the Adventure Society to be fitted with one of the special collars.

“This is exceptional work, Asano,” Elspeth Arella told him as he left the secured room. “Very few of the Builder’s cultists have been taken alive.”

“Hopefully he knows something we can use,” Emir said.

Both had been preparing for the meeting when they got word of Jason’s capturing a cultist.

“Who is going to do the interrogating?” Clive asked.

“The deputy director is notifying the Adventure Society’s Continental Council as we speak,” Arella said. “They will want to send someone. In the meantime, the timing of this is excellent. We can discuss the potential ramifications in the meeting.”

The meeting was something of a war council for the anti-Builder cult efforts. It had been formed after the gruesome first removal of a star seed and Clive’s declaration that the Builder was their unseen enemy. From the beginning it had included Elspeth Arella, Emir, Danielle Geller, Thalia Mercer and Clive himself.

It had also included Nicolas Hendren, the archbishop of the church of Purity. Following the revelation of Purity’s apparent involvement, the archbishop had vanished, along with other key members on what his church referred to as previously-scheduled sabbaticals. In the place of Hendren was the new Chief Priest of the Healer.

Like the rest of the Healer’s local clergy, the Healer had brought him in after excising the previous corruption. The new Chief Priest was now in charge of handling matters regarding the purgation of star seeds, although no new instances had come up since the original five. The closest was Jason, who was himself a unique case for whom a specialised member of the church had been brought in.

The Duke of Greenstone was now also included, as were Arabelle and Gabriel Remore. Of the visiting gold-rankers, only their team mate Callum was absent.

Lucian Lamprey had been a conspicuous absentee from previous meetings. Excluding the director of the Magic Society had been a bold move, but his penchant for corruption was well known. Given that he had been hauled away in chains, it proved to be a prescient move.

Lamprey’s successor was Pochard Finn, who was an equally distasteful individual but one with a better understanding of where the line was when it came to breaking the rules. Even with security tightened in the wake of Archbishop Hendren’s disappearance, Finn had been included as acting director of the Magic Society. Arella was confident that Finn knew he would need to be completely above reproach to have his position made permanent, especially considering his friendship with Lamprey.

The meeting began by bringing everyone up to speed on the new prisoner and the revelation that Jason could sense star seeds.

“It was as much of a surprise to me as anyone,” Jason said. “The applications are obvious, but I don’t know if it’s possible to hide from my senses. The man we captured may simply not have been trying because he didn’t know he needed to.”

“Even if they can hide it from you,” Danielle Geller said, “they are most likely as uncertain about it as we are, which we can use.”

“What do you mean?” Thalia Mercer asked.

“She means that we start using me as an evil detector to check all the most important people in Greenstone,” Jason said. “We do it on the quiet, because there’s no stopping word getting out and keeping secrets will make them fearful and paranoid. Some will make mistakes, others will run.”

“So, we kick the cupboard and see what bugs come scurrying out,” Gabriel said.

“That would be the idea,” Danielle said. “We won’t be able to catch as many as we’d like to put in a jar, but at least we would clear out some of the infestation and get some idea of just how bad it is.”

They made some preliminary decisions but largely left the details to be arranged later. They then moved on to the original main topic, the upcoming incursion into the astral space. The only real decision to be made was who to send through. Jason’s team was a given, leaving the question of who would go alone.

“I think the more the better,” the Duke opined. “We need to make absolutely certain that these people are stopped.”

“There is a question of capability,” Emir said. “Frankly, the local adventurers are lacking, which is why I brought in more people for the first time we sent people in. Aside from Jason and Clive’s team, Bethany Cavendish’s team and some of the Geller trainees are the only ones I would consider reliable enough to send.”

“We don’t have a lot of iron-rankers left on the estate,” Danielle said. “With the monster surge imminent and all this business with the Builder, the decision was made to send them all home.”

“You brought in more people before, Bahadir,” Thalia said. “We could do so again. Portal them in directly, instead of all that pomp of bringing them in by ship.”

“There are some specifics related to how we are getting in that need to be considered,” Clive ventured. “We can’t be sure that the people we send through will arrive in the same place. The city within the astral space is surrounded by entry point towers, and while we may all emerge from the same one, we might not, as happened the last time we went in. Additionally, Jason’s power currently only allows for ten iron rankers to pass through per use. We have the expectation that that limit will hold true when using it to access the astral space.”

“What’s the most likely outcome?” Arella asked.

“We can’t be sure,” Clive said. “The astral magic involved is operating on principles we’re only just beginning to understand.”

“What do you think is the best approach?” Arabelle asked Clive.

“There is a chance,” Clive said, “that once we force the door open, we won’t be able to do it again. Not from this side, at least. If we don’t send Jason through, in the hope that he can keep opening the door to send more people through, there’s a chance that we leave whoever we did send stranded. From what we understand, leaving the astral space should be much easier than getting in but there is no way to be sure of that before we make the transition. There is far more uncertainty than I would be comfortable risking if we don’t have to”

“You’re giving us a lot of qualifiers, Standish,” Pochard Finn said. “Are you not confident in your understanding of what you’re working on?”

“Of course I’m not,” Clive said. “You’re an administrator, Finn. You have no idea of what we’re dealing with. It isn’t just about complexity. This astral magic we’re dealing with is rewriting the foundations of our understanding. Once this is all over, people will build careers in the Magic Society on the back of what we’re learning. If someone has been telling you they’re confident that they have a handle on all this, then get rid of them, as fast as you can. That person isn’t just ignorant. They’re a dangerous idiot.”

Jason hid a quiet chuckle behind his hand.

“My advice is to send one team,” Clive said. “Ours has six people. Potentially it could be supplemented by four.”

“Is that enough?” Arella asked. “We know exactly who went into that astral space and who came back out. Granted, we don’t know how many of those died because the tracking stones can’t record a death across a dimensional boundary.”

“I do,” Shade said, emerging from Jason’s shadow. “At the time the trials ended, forty-eight people had died and fourteen had been turned into flesh abominations.”

“Seventy-five failed to come back,” Arella said. “That’s potentially thirteen Builder cultists.”

“I would bet on my son’s team against any fifteen cultists,” Danielle said.

“Don’t let yourself be blinded by family,” Thalia said bitterly. “I made that mistake and it cost me my son.”

“She’s right,” Gabriel said. “Arella, can you use that list to figure out which people those thirteen are?”

“If Jason’s familiar can tell me which one’s were transformed or killed, then yes.”

“Then we figure out what whoever goes through will potentially be up against and decide from there,” Gabriel said.

After more discussion, Clive’s suggestion was provisionally taken up, pending further investigation.

“The last question, then, is when this will actually happen,” Arella said. “When can we expect to have a ritual that will get the door open?”

“Jason has been coming out daily to the site,” Clive said. “In about a week we should have the rest of the team come with him because at that point, we may get the portal open at any time. And as I said, we may only get one chance to send people through.”

“Actually, there is one more thing to discuss,” Jason said. “Once the Builder cult is dealt with we intend to release all the people trapped in flesh prisons by the astral creatures infesting the astral space. I’m sure you’ve all heard of the vorger.”

“Asano,” Arella said, “as long as you stop the cultists from making off with the astral space, I don’t care if you move in there and set up a fried octopus stall. Just make sure you remember the priority.”

Chapter 221

The World Needs People Like You

Jason and his team made preparations for their entry into the astral space, with some preparations being more important than others.

"I just can't make that much crystal wash," Jory said. "A lot of my workshop is tied up in making the lesser miracle potions, now."

"We'll be spending months in that place, hunting down these abominations," Jason said. "There's hundreds of them."

"Your cloud house uses crystal wash more efficiently than just tipping it over your head, right?"

"Yeah," Jason reluctantly acknowledged. "It adds a diluted amount into the shower."

"There you are, then. Look, I'll delay a few orders and give you everything I can, but there's only so much I have to give."

"That's all I can ask for. Thanks, mate. Belinda told you we're having a big blow out barbie before we go, yeah?"

"She did."

"Alright, then. Best head off."

Jory and Jason went back out through the waiting room, where the Chief Priest of the Healer was just coming in.

"Mr Asano, Mr Tillman," he greeted.

"Chief Priest," Jason greeted, before heading out.

"If you have a moment, Mr Tillman," the Chief Priest said, "I would like to discuss something with you."

"Of course," Jory said, leading the Chief Priest into the break room in the back. "Can I offer you refreshments, Chief Priest?"

"I'm fine, thank you."

"Are you sure? Jason's frosted frost pepper squares aren't to be missed."

"Very well," The Chief Priest acceded and Jory put some tea on to brew as he plated a few of the sweet slices from the chiller.

"The reason I've come to see you today is to discuss the future of the clinic, here," the Chief Priest said.

"Oh?" Jory prompted, warily.

"The Healer is extremely happy with what you've accomplished here. He believes it is time for you to look at training someone to take over and move on."

Jory frowned.

“You’re trying to kick me out of my own clinic? I realise and appreciate that the Healer sanctified it, but that doesn’t give you the right to make me leave.”

“You misunderstand, Mr Tillman,” the Chief Priest said. “What you’ve done here, studying the local resources and finding the best way to make effective and affordable medicines, is a joy to my god. There are many alchemists within the church, but your dedication to those who need the most, rather than those who can afford the most, fills him with delight. He wants you to do it again, and teach others to do the same. We want the Tillman method to be spread across the world, and we’ll give you all the funding and resources you could possibly need.”

Jory looked over at the Chief priest, then turned back to the task of brewing the tea, thinking over what the priest had said. He poured out a pair of cups and brought them over with the plate of slices.

“I’m not sure how to respond to that,” Jory said. “I don’t know if I have the kind of expertise to teach others.”

“Your humility is a credit to you, Mr Tillman. Yes, you do not have the skills of a master alchemist, but you are far from incompetent and we will help you develop your proficiencies further. What is important to my god, however, is not your ability, but the way you think. We can produce the alchemists; what we want is the vision. Your vision.”

“I... I never considered anything like you’re describing. I mean, the whole world?”

“The world needs people like you, Mr Tillman. We would very much like to give you to it.”

Jory bit absently into a confectionary slice, lost in thought. The Chief Priest did the same as he waited for Jory to think things over.

“Oh, these are rather good,” the priest said.

Jory took a moment to gather his thoughts while the priest appreciatively devoured his slice as swiftly as decorum would allow.

“Why now?” Jory asked as the priest wiped his fingers on a napkin. “There’s a monster surge coming up and crazy cultists running all over the world. It seems like a bad time for a new endeavour.”

“If you wait for everything to be perfect,” the priest said, “you’ll never do anything at all. We’ve been watching you, Mr Tillman, through your recent and rapid changes of circumstances. First you were able to build your new facility, then you obtained the public endorsement of my god and the support of our church. Now, your new enterprise with the miracle potions is already bringing in wealth.”

“So, this is because I have more resources?”

“No, Mr Tillman. Compared to our church, the scale of your resources and operations are inconsequential. What matters is character. What did you do after you went from a struggling alchemist trying to help people to a moneyed and respected member of the community? You worked even harder to help people. More research into expanding your existing range of cheaper medicines. Hiring people to work on production so you could extend your operations without comprising care. We’ve been watching, Mtw Tillman, and we like what we see. You have made a place for yourself in my god’s affections.”

Jory had an awkward and embarrassed expression as he searched for an appropriate response.

“Thank you?”

“No, Mr Tillman, thank *you*.”

The priest stood up.

“Take some time to think about our proposal, Mr Tillman. When you’re ready to discuss it further, or if you have any questions at all, don’t hesitate to come find me.”

Half-turning to go, the priest paused, glancing down at the plate on the table and it’s remaining slices.

“Can I take one of these?”

Jason looked at the combat robe set out on the standing rack. It was mostly the scaled, matte black of umbral snakeskin, with grey leather trim. It was darker than his current combat robes, keeping the grey/black colouration but reversing it, switching the black from the embellishments to the main colour. It maintained the sleek, draping lines, enhanced by the scaled texture of the snakeskin. It looked to compromise toughness with flexibility in a ratio he was very happy with.

“I know you have been satisfied with your existing combat robes,” Gilbert said, “so I didn’t diverge too wildly with this design. That said, I took advantage of the umbral snake leather you provided, and was able to tailor the outfit to your personal needs, rather than an off the rack item. I added marsh hydra leather to the umbral snake hide and the lining is deep wrym silk, which I was quite lucky to get my hands on. It did add to the cost a little, but I’m confident that you’ll find the expense reflected in the results. The aesthetics I largely maintained, although obviously the material has made for a darker result. I designed the look to compliment your famous cloak power.”

Jason reached out to touch the robes.

Item: [Dark Hydra Robe] (bronze rank, epic)

A full body armour, carefully hand-crafted from the leather of an umbral mountain snake and a marsh hydra, lined with deep wyrm silk. (armour, cloth/leather).

- Effect: Increased resistance to damage. Highly effective against cutting and piercing damage, less effective against blunt damage.
- Effect: Rapidly repairs damage. Can reconstitute itself from near-total destruction.
- Effect: Heal over time effects have increased strength and duration.
- Effect: Increases natural poison resistance. Abilities that enhance poison resistance are enhanced.
- Effect: Weapons conjured while wearing the robes inflict [Umbral Snake Venom].
- Effect: Adapts to fit the wearer, within a certain range.

- [Umbral Snake Venom] (damage-over-time, poison, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until poison is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

“Bert, you have well and truly outdone yourself,” Jason said.

“I aim to please, Mr Asano.”

“Then you overshot, because I’m delighted.”

With a potential stay of months in the monster-infested astral space, Jason and his team anticipated reaching bronze during their stay. There was a good chance that a lengthy stay would make them miss the monster surge, but months in the magically saturated astral space would be like a private monster surge that never ended. As the astral space was short on shopping outlets, they were buying equipment now. They would each need at least some basic bronze-rank gear to make the most of their new rank.

Humphrey’s expenses were slight, as he conjured his most critical equipment. Since he was from the wealthiest family, he took on the costs of most of the team’s general pool of consumables. This was mostly healing and mana potions of both bronze and iron-rank. Rather than go to Jory, he largely purchased high-cost, high-yield potions from the trade hall.

He did buy a supply of miracle potions from Jory, although it was a low-cook, low-batch potion. Jory spared them what he could, letting the Adventure Society contact his far-flung customer base to explain why their were delays in shipping. Most of the customers for the miracle potion were distant, but the demand was high.

Sophie and Belinda, but mostly Sophie, had earned some money adventuring. To that they added the nest egg once intended to fund their escape from the city. Sophie purchased the armour made from leftover umbral snake leather, although the design was different to Jason's. She preferred a fitted but still supple outfit, in this case with chitinous plates supplementing the snakeskin where flexibility was not required. It offered some extra protection over critical areas, looking to Jason like sexy tactical armour.

Belinda had a few costs, as her role-switching powers required some basic gear for different roles, including wands, light armour, heavy armour, a bow, a shield and a selection of melee weapons. This kind of equipment was outside of her knowledge base, so Gary served as her expert guide. He helped her pick out some reliable, basic gear at good prices, making sure she wasn't fed a lemon.

Belinda also had her own familiars that would rank up at some stage, but didn't have the cash Jason did during their trip to the markets of Jayapura. She only had enough materials to summon her familiars once at bronze rank.

Clive and Neil both had growth items, courtesy of Clive's efforts on their first trip to the astral space. Much like a familiar re-summoning, the ritual of bronze ascension each one required came with expensive material requirements.

Of all the team, Jason had it the worst in terms of expenses, although he made no complaints. His growth items and familiars were a blessing than many adventurers would and did envy, and he firmly believe that every coin spent on them was completely worthwhile.

Jason had blown a huge chunk of his money on summoning materials for his familiars, which were his first priority. Compared to his equipment, they were his allies, valuable and important. Nothing took precedence in Jason's mind over giving them everything he could after the support they had given him. Their comforting presence within his soul had been a boon during his recovery, and without Colin, especially, there may not have been a soul to recover.

He had made sure that he had enough to summon them at bronze-rank and resummon them once more if something happened to them. With the Adventure Society supplying the materials for Colin's rank-up ritual, he had enough to summon the already-bronze leech monster twice more times.

Between those materials and what he had spent feeding materials into his cloud house, he had largely expended his funds. If not for the huge monetary reward from the final quest before his quest system went away, he would have had trouble affording anything.

Luckily, he was able to conjure his own weapon, saving the cost of that. He restricted himself to upgraded versions of his existing armour and boots, courtesy of Gilbert and Filbert, respectively. Supplying the main material for his armour also brought down the cost, although it remained a premium product with a premium price. Aside from those, Jason bought a large supply of cheap consumables, mostly potions from Jory and a large supply of the throwing darts that he used.

His last notable expense was a pair of skill books. They were common topics, therefore not too expensive. One covered the basics of alchemy and the other and artifice, the construction of magical items. They gave him none of the expertise of Jory or the man who supplied his darts. They were a contingency, should he find himself able to scrape together the materials for some consumables, but lack for a craftsman. More than the books themselves, it was the basic tools of artifice and alchemy that were the larger cost.

Jason had been trepidatious about using skill books again, after the last time triggered flashbacks. Mercifully, using the iron-rank books proved less stressful than the bronze-rank book he had used previously and did not trigger any flashbacks.

In the conference room next to the office of the Adventure Society director, Jason's team was lined up along one side of the table. On the other was Elspeth Arella.

"The Cavendish family have declined to let Beth Cavendish and her team join you," Arella said. "A lot of capable adventurers died the first time around, and that was a matter of weeks, rather than months. There also weren't Builder cultists to contend with."

"Then who is being tapped to supplement us?" Jason asked.

"There has been some discussion of that," Arella said. "Once we realised that Humphrey's familiar would take up one of the available spaces We considered bringing in four-person team from outside the city, we ultimately decided that your team would go alone. Assume you are still willing to do that."

"Of course we are," Sophie said fiercely. Jason and Arella might have reached an amicable détente, but Sophie still harboured resentment over Arella's attempt to sell her off to Lucian Lamprey.

"Did you manage to find out which people were left behind when the trial ended?" Clive asked.

"We did," Arella said. "All locals; none of the people Bahadir brought in from outside. We've been looking into their families and other connections. For most of them, their teams thought they were dead. If your familiar is accurate about them still being alive but remaining behind, then we have our cultists."

“How capable are they in a fight?” Humphrey asked.

“Not great,” Arella said. “Decent by Greenstone standards, but we all know about Greenstone standards. The danger they represent is not to be underestimated, however. With the amount of time they’ve spent in there, they will almost certainly be bronze rank by now. They also have the numbers. If all thirteen are still alive, that’s better than two to one against you.”

“Our best bet would be to bide our time once we get there,” Neil said. “Get some of our own people over the line to bronze-rank before taking the fight to them.”

“The problem is, we don’t know how much time we have,” Clive said. “We don’t know exactly what they’re doing in there, or how they’re doing it.”

“Well, finding out will be something we have to figure out,” Jason said.

“We can offer you one possible advantage,” Arella said. “Everyone who went into the astral space had their aura signatures checked. We couldn’t test for star seeds specifically at that point, but anyone with an aura signature that didn’t match their existing record was excluded.”

“Meaning the cult probably sent through people who didn’t have seeds,” Humphrey said.

“Yes,” Arella said. “It means that if any of them haven’t reached bronze rank, their tracking stones will still work, if you take them with you into the astral space. If they’ve all reached bronze rank, though, the change to their aura will obviate the power of the stones. Adventurers need new badges at each rank for a reason.”

“The stones should still tell us if they’re alive or dead though,” Clive said. “That’s not nothing. The Order of the Reaper’s astral space is a dangerous zone and some or all of them could very well have perished.”

“That would be the most fortuitous result,” Arella said. “Whatever circumstance you walk into, however, your ultimate goal is the same: Find out what they are doing and stop it. This is that exceptionally rare three star iron-rank mission. We can’t predict the situation, so the specifics of how you go about that are for you to decide.”

“Trust the person on the ground,” Humphrey said.

“That was how your mother put it, yes,” Arella said. “She has a lot of faith in you.”

“It does sound dangerous,” Belinda said.

“Still better odds than what we were looking at a year ago,” Sophie told her. “We’d just come under Ventress’ protection, with Silva breathing down our necks.”

Sophie turned to Arella.

“Any word on Silva?”

Jason knew that long-term incarceration was a rare form of punishment in his new world. Punishment was more immediately punitive, often through fines and seizures to the wealthy, or indentured servitude for the poor. For the powerful, denial of access to the services like the Magic and Adventure Societies could be very harmful. Execution was also available for more heinous crimes.

“Yes,” Arella said. “He will be returned here, with Lamprey being sent to his own birth city. Both will be receiving skeletal suppression.”

Clive let out a low whistle, while Humphrey and Neil winced. It wasn’t a form of punishment Jason had heard of.

“What’s skeletal suppression?” he asked.

“It’s like a suppression collar,” Clive said. “Except instead of a collar, the magic is inscribed directly onto the skeleton. Permanent loss of powers. It’s an incredibly invasive and painful procedure derived from necromancy techniques. It’s a controversial punishment that many, including the church of the Healer, think should be outlawed.”

“It’s usually a death sentence anyway,” Neil said. “People who receive that kind of punishment usually have enemies. Once they’re cut loose without any power, those enemies catch up with them fast.”

“Works for me,” Sophie said. “I’m exactly the kind of enemy who’d like to catch up with him.”

“What about the cultist I caught?” Jason asked, forcibly changing the topic. “Has he coughed up anything useful?”

“The Adventure Society’s Continental Council sent people to work on him,” Arella said. “They’re doing so as we speak and haven’t told me much, yet. They did say that there seems to be an awareness amongst the Builder cultists of you, Jason. They call you the Rejector.”

“That’s not a cool nickname,” Jason said. “Why couldn’t it have been something more awesome, like ‘the Defiant,’ or ‘Captain Tremendous.’”

“You actually want people to call you Captain Tremendous?” Sophie asked.

“Doesn’t everyone want that?”

“This conversation has officially crossed my idiocy threshold,” Arella said, getting up. “This meeting is adjourned.”

Chapter 222

I'm Very Big on Cowardice

As Emir's team came closer to opening the portal, the decision was made to move the team to the site under the lake. Jason's ongoing availability would be useful for the final push to open the portal and the team needed to be ready to go. They weren't exactly sure when Emir's researchers would finally succeed and the team had to be packed and waiting.

Even if they navigated the dangers and returned safely, it would be months before they saw family and friends again. There was a large barbecue party in the park district the day before, friends and family making big farewells before the more private ones that would take place the following morning.

Having been the organiser, Jason played smiling host, shaking hands and chatting with the friends he had made over the better part of the last year. Danielle Geller told him to look after her son, but also himself. Neil's mother harangued him about not getting her boy into any trouble.

The event started before lunch, continued through the afternoon and on into the evening as the barbecues were fired up again for dinner. Over the course of the day, Jason would discreetly slip away, though, watching from afar or wandering through the pretty gardens of the park district alone. Jason had made close, amazing friends, but as he watched them with their families, he was reminded that he hadn't known any of them longer than a year.

Jason's powerful and controlled aura allowed to hide his inner turmoil effectively from most of the people present. A silver ranker would have to rudely explore his aura, and the gold rankers followed decorum and had their auras non-intrusively alert for danger without probing the people around them. This was true for all but Arabelle. Her sensitive and powerful aura senses shamelessly, if subtly, examined Jason's condition. To her surprise, Jason sensed her intrusion and gave her a flat look.

During one of Jason's little disappearances, she sent Gary after him, rather than follow herself. The big leonid was also one of the few with no family present, with even the wanderlustful Emir having his granddaughter. Sophie and Belinda were the others, the pair having considered each other their only real family for years.

The park district was a combination of open, grassy spaces and feature gardens. Gary found Jason sitting alone in a small gazebo in a garden that artfully showed off the more attractive plant life of the delta. It was rather like a small version of the Geller Estate.

“It feels like we haven’t seen so much of each other in a while,” Gary said, sitting down next to Jason. “Even when I’m living in your houseboat.”

Rufus’ reaction to Farrah’s death had been loud and immediate. Gary’s mourning of their friend had been slower, affecting more of a lasting change. He was more sober and withdrawn, and there was still uncertainty about his team, now just him and Rufus. Farrah had been the glue holding their trio so neatly together and, in her absence, they hadn’t really done any adventuring as a pair. Rufus had worked out his anger through a series of solitary monster hunts, while Gary threw himself into craftsmanship.

Gary was older than Rufus and Farrah, like Jory having spent much of his time at iron rank on his profession as a weaponsmith. In the wake of Farrah’s death he had retreated back into his profession, using the hammering of steel and the heat of the forge to still the thoughts in his head. It was a meditative process as he produced one weapon after another.

Rufus had split his time between the academy annex project with the Geller family and the investigation into the Builder cult. Gary had, in turn, spent most of the last few months working with the Magic Society on the Builder cult’s construct creatures, looking for effective ways to combat what seemed to be the cult’s main fighting force.

Gary had made a weapon for Jason that would be effective against construct enemies. His subsequent work didn’t share the same care and time that went into Jason’s sword, instead focusing on volume. Greenstone’s weapons market had become flush with anti-construct weapons that were inexpensive and reliable.

Slowly the pair had started to come back together. Rufus had reached out to Gary to help with the construction of his training complex. It was not high-skill work and it could have been any decent smith, but Gary had taken to the task with enthusiasm.

More recently, with Jason’s team about to enter the astral space, they had come together to help the team prepare. Rufus took them through everything they knew about the cult, while Gary took them through everything they knew about the cult’s weapons. Any advantage they could get over the cult or their construct monsters could be the difference between life and death. Gary had also helped the team prepare equipment for bronze rank. Belinda had received the most help, ending up with a number of Gary’s personal creations at very friendly prices.

Jason and Gary sat together amiably in the gazebo.

“Nothing seems to fit together quite right with her gone, does it?” Jason asked.

“No,” Gary said. “It’s like I’m waiting for things to go back to normal, when it already has. I just don’t like that normal has a big, Farrah-shaped hole in it. I don’t even know

when my team became such a big part of who I am, but it feels like a part of me went with her.”

Jason couldn't find any words to support him that didn't sound trite, so instead he briefly leaned into the big man; a simple gesture of solidarity.

“She'd be proud of you, you know,” Gary said. “The adventurer you've become.”

“I was so bratty to her,” Jason said with a sad, reminiscent laugh. “Moralising at her, when I didn't know a damn thing. She must have thought I was a spoiled child.”

“The thing about children,” Gary said, “is that they're innocent. She didn't want you to lose that.”

“I don't think I've succeeded,” Jason said. “There's a lot of blood on my hands, now.”

“Arabelle told me that there is only so much value to be had in looking at the things we've done,” Gary said. “In the end, all they can do is help us decide what we're going to do next. That's what matters.”

Jason nodded. He wasn't the only one Rufus' mother had guided through dark times.

“What's next for you?” Jason asked Gary.

“Well, Rufus is here for a while, with the training complex he's doing. Our contract with Emir has really been over since he got here. I was thinking it might be time to go home, help them ride out the monster surge. Home, home, not Vitesse.”

“You have family back home?”

“Yeah, I'm thick with them,” Gary said. “Becoming an adventurer has really helped them out, and I've been able to send home essences for more of them. It's kept me away from them too, though. I think it might be time to go back for a while.”

“I squandered my family,” Jason said. “I only really saw my sister anymore. She's a lot older than me and my brother and didn't really grow up with us. She lived close to me with her husband and little girl and tried to mend fences between me, Mum and my brother. I didn't realise what I was throwing away in refusing to let go of the past. Not until I came here and no longer had the choice.”

“Once you're done with the astral space, you can come visit my family,” Gary said. “You'll get all the mothering you could ask for and then some.”

“I'd like that,” Jason said. “Our plan is to go to Vitesse, after we get back out. We're staying focused on the task in front of us, though.”

“The way it should be,” Gary said. “Treasure your team, Jason. Adventuring is a dangerous business, and you're about to face about as much danger as this job has to offer.”

Each of Jason's team members went through their own farewells. For Humphrey, it was an almost formal affair. The Gellers had been sending their young people out into lives of adventure for hundreds of years and Humphrey felt the weight of them all as he took his place amongst that tradition. All his family members were present to wish him well. There might be various factions within the family, but adventuring was a sacred duty to them all.

For Neil and Clive, it was also a matter of large family affairs. For all the differences in the station of eel farmers versus mid-tier aristocracy, they were unaware that each was experiencing oddly similar circumstances at the same time. Their families gathered in boisterous celebration, with both being fussed over by their mothers. Both were also warned not to 'let that Asano boy lead you into trouble.'

"Mum," Clive said. "I know Jason well. I know the things he's been through and the things he's done. You've met him yourself, multiple times. You were talking to him yesterday."

"He does seem like a nice boy."

"Then why is it that you always seem to think that something Aunt Helen heard from some guy is somehow a more reliable source of information than me?"

As those with families were getting their farewells, Belinda spent her last morning with Jory. Sophie roamed the streets of Old City, aimless and alone. Like Jason, she had no family, while lacking his ability to make such fast friends. With her looks she had always been good at getting attention, but with her circumstances, it had rarely been welcome.

If not for Belinda, she would have been completely alone in the world. She had no family, not that she knew of. She didn't even know the name of the city she had been born in, her father having brought them to Greenstone after her mother's death when she was a small girl.

Until the revelation that the martial arts her father taught her was the inheritance of some ancient order of assassins, she had never been curious about where she came from. Now she awaited Emir's investigation into her background, as interested in the results as he was.

The idea of an apparently famous treasure hunter helping her find her background was one of many strange things that had come from falling into Jason Asano's field of influence. He had turned much of her understanding and experience on its head. Suddenly she was surrounded by people who didn't live lives of trying to take everything they could, because they didn't need to. They already had it. She had always resented the rich and

powerful, but being amongst them gave her the unfamiliar sensation of people wanting nothing more from her than companionship. A friend and an ally, rather than a tool or a object of lust.

There was a strange charisma to Asano that affected the people around him. It was like he could obviate social hierarchy through sheer force of personality, putting farmers and thieves shoulder to shoulder with princes and nobles. It had brought her into a strange world of possibility that even now felt delicate, as if it could all be snatched away in a moment.

With a blast of air that startled the people around her, she launched herself up to a rooftop and sat down on the edge. Her dimensional bag took the form of a vest, from which she took out an envelope, worn from handling. Inside was her indenture contract; the symbol of six months during which she was ostensibly enslaved, yet had given her freedom and opportunity. That period had taken her from desperation and hopelessness to a world of potential. She turned the envelope over in her hands, looking at it without opening it, before putting it away again.

She had more friends now than she knew what to do with. Humphrey, righteous and kind, with an unwavering sense of responsibility. Clive, smart like Belinda, but filled with a boyish curiosity. Neil, whose sensible practicality would have blended in most places, but stood out in a group of extreme personalities. Then there was Jason. Strange and unpredictable, yet also fierce and principled. Capable of inflicting terrible horrors, yet would go to great lengths to help not just a friend, but a stranger.

Her feelings about Jason were complicated. He was compelling, yet infuriating. Clever, yet foolish; naïve, but also cunning. He would hide his virtues and proudly announce his failings. He seemed to have neither pride nor honour, yet she had come to realise that he was filled with his own versions of both.

More and more, she found herself wondering what he thought of her. Friendship? Pity? He had always maintained a certain distance, painfully aware of the indenture contract. It was as if he didn't understand the degree which he had turned it from a cage into a tool of liberation, despite it being his plan in the first place.

She wasn't what he was drawn to in a woman, she knew that. He had seen her with his lover, Cassandra, and his flirtations with the sapphire-haired celestine princess. He was attracted to sultry, socially aggressive women, rather than ones who were standoffish and the regular kind of aggressive.

She had felt his gaze from time to time, but she had also sensed him trying to be respectful. He knew that things she had been through and the kinds of men she had

known. He was almost infuriatingly different from the men who had been pursuing her for most of her life.

In some ways, Jason reminded her of Jory. For a long time, Jory been the only decent man in her and Belinda's lives. Even Old Man Silva, whose protection she had enjoyed for years, was a man she had no illusions about. He told her he thought of her as a daughter, but treated her as a pet. Like many men of power, he looked at other people as possessions.

While Belinda was drawn to Jory's kindness and generosity, Sophie had been more compelled by clever, playful men. In her world, though, such men had inevitably been predators, with more than one lover learning the hard way that she wasn't prey.

She stood up, using her powers to climb the tallest building in the area and look out over Old City. For most of her life it had been her whole world, and she wondered when it had started to seem so small. Now, just one world was no longer enough. Soon she would be headed to an otherworldly city of ancient assassins and ambitious cultists.

She checked her watch, which had been annoyingly expensive, but the cheap ones tended to lose time in her dimensional bag. She laughed, thinking about the kind of problems she had now, compared to when she had lived in the streets below. Her thoughts returned to Jason.

Jory had wanted to help her, but Jason was the one who found a way. He looked at her seemingly insurmountable problems and went from hunting her down to transforming her world for no more reason than she needed him to. He did it in the face of her suspicion and hostility and he did it so thoroughly that it rewrote her entire future. She thought about his smug, smirking face, the impish grin and made an admission to herself.

"Damn it," she muttered.

Jason and his team moved into the strange, ruined village at the bottom of the lake, water pressing down on the magical dome above them. While Emir maintained the palace on the surface of the lake above, Jason set up his cloud house under the dome. Rather than the adaptive version he had been using, he tried the more ostentatious version. The result was a large, two-storey building with that same beautiful sunset colours of the cloud palace, without being so vast and grandiose. He had to return it to the flask before each attempt of the portal, otherwise he would have to leave it behind.

Jason had invited Jory along who had elected to join them until they left, spending a few extra days with Belinda. The team even offered him a chance to come along, which no few adventurers would have jumped at but he firmly declined. One trip to the astral space

was enough to confirm to Jory that he was a healer and an alchemist out of choice and only an adventurer out of necessity.

The archway they had used to enter the astral space was still there, a sleek, obsidian object that looked much the same as Jason's shadow gate power. The archway was now surrounded by the largest and most complicated magical diagram Jason had ever seen. Multiple times a day, Clive would trot Jason out to try and activate the portal with the latest permutation of the diagram.

As days became a week, Jason became used to his power fizzling out. When it finally worked, then, he was almost startled. A dark line of dark energy appeared at the bottom of the arch, rising up to fill the archway and establish the portal. Watching on, Emir's eyes glistened with triumph and he congratulated his team, who were standing around with Clive, celebrating their success.

The rest of the team had been on standby for each attempt and rapidly gathered themselves together.

"Jason and I will go first," Clive said, "as we have the best chance of getting back if something goes wrong. The rest of you quickly follow, as we don't know long the portal will remain stable."

"We've all discussed what to do if we're separated," Humphrey added. "If you find yourself alone on the other side, you know what to do."

Jason turned his gaze to Emir, trying to impart all the gratitude he felt in a simple nod, receiving Emir's smiling nod in return. He took a steeling breath, then stepped through the portal, practically pushed by Clive, who followed right after. Humphrey and Stash were next, followed by Neil, all picking their way carefully through the magical diagram on the floor. Sophie looked at Belinda, arms wrapped around Jory.

"You heard the man," Sophie said. "Don't take too long."

Sophie made her own way across the room, glancing back before stepping through the shadowy gate.

"I know you're still thinking about the what Healer asked of you," Belinda told Jory, moving her arms up from his waist to around his neck. He opened his mouth to speak but she put a hand over it.

"You need to stop thinking and just do it," she said. "I don't want to get back and find you where I left you, Tillman."

Jory's eyes sparkled and she took her hand away.

"Yes, Ma'am."

She gave him a lingering kiss and made her way across the circle to the portal, when he called out to her.

“Stay safe!”

“Don’t worry,” she said, flashing him a grin. “I’m very big on cowardice.”

“I’ve heard Jason say the same thing,” he told her. “And he’s a big, fat liar.”

She stepped through the portal and the smile sank from Jory’s face. He sighed, then looked up at the dome above him, holding off all the water.

“How do I get out of here?”

Chapter 223

More Powerful Than We Anticipated

In their hidden lair in the ruins of the Vane Estate, the leader of the local Builder cult, Zato, was fuming. One of the cultists had used a stone-shaping power to construct rooms in the subterranean cavern, of which Zato's personal quarters was the largest.

Timos, who had risen to his second-in-command, was waiting out the rage. He knew that while Zato seemed consumed in fury, once he had worked through his anger he would be ready to make more considered decisions. For the moment though, he was cursing the walls. The subject of his incoherent ranting was Jason Asano.

It was a name that now preyed on the minds of the cultists; the very idea of someone resisting the Builder's power sent chills through every cultist with a star seed. As volunteers, they had only surrendered a portion of their will to the Builder, compared the complete takeover that unwilling subjects suffered. They nonetheless had a direct connection to the unimaginable immensity of the Builder's power. The idea of someone withstanding that power filled them with dread.

The most infuriating part was that the cult hadn't even been responsible for the creation of the Rejector. Killian Laurent had seemed like an invaluable ally in getting the cult's resources out of the city during the purge and giving him what he needed to bring another person under the Builder's control seemed a small price to pay, given that he already had a star seed.

The results of this bargain had been a disaster. Not only did Asano withstand the star seed, but he was allowed to live, which was as grave a sin as was to be found in the cult. The results, from the exposed agents to the demoralised cultists were ample demonstrations of why. The promise of power was what had brought so many people into the cult in the first place. There was never a shortage of disenfranchised people looking for a place to belong and to escape the powerlessness of their lives. The Rejector was a living demonstration that the Builder's power was not absolute, and he was still running around and causing trouble. Normally, those incredibly rare few who managed to somehow outlast the star seed were put down, hard and fast.

Laurent's failure to kill Asano was only the beginning of his betrayal. The logistical assistance he provided the cult had not been in as good faith as they thought, being used to his own ends. Not many had the nerve to deal and then double-cross the cult. As it turned out, Laurent had used the purge as cover to prepare his own flight from the city. Many of the losses the cult suffered during the purge were actually fed to the Adventure

Society by Laurent himself, drawing attention away as he plundered the Silva family's wealth. Now Laurent was gone with a small fortune in money and resources, leaving the cult and the Silva family both to deal with the aftermath.

On top of the demoralising factor of the Rejector's mere existence was the impact he had on their operations. It was bad enough that he had somehow found a way into the astral space they were still months away from breaching themselves. It was worse that the Adventure Society had been able to use him to flush out some of the cult's key people still embedded in Greenstone. What's more, some of those uncovered had been taken alive, something that shouldn't have been possible. From what little information they gathered before completely severing their Greenstone contacts for safety was that the Rejector's encounter with the Builder had given Asano some power to shock their star seeds into inaction long enough to suppress the seed's power to detonate.

The fortunate thing was that Timos, who had facilitated most of those insertions years ago, had been fastidious in his precautions. He ran cult operatives in small groups, keeping them isolated from one another and the information compartmentalised. None of the people infiltrating the Adventure and Magic Societies had any information that could critically impact the cult's larger plans if revealed. The information flow had all been one way, through a network of dead drops.

The infiltrators could identify Timos, but as Timos has already been exposed that was no longer an issue. They could also reveal the very basics of the plan to claim the Order of the Reaper's astral space, but that, too, had largely been exposed already. Timos had kept them in the dark about the details not relating to their specific roles, which made their exposure only a limited liability.

The biggest loss was that their most valuable information sources in the city had been uprooted. The directors of the Adventure and Magic Societies had paraded all their key officials past Asano, who started picking them out like selecting fruit at a market. Zato and Timos had managed to get word out to some of their people who had either made their escape, or detonated themselves pre-emptively. But dead, escaped or taken alive, those people were no longer feeding the cult information. They had to assume their entire dead-drop information network was compromised and had closed it down entirely.

Eventually Zato calmed down, taking a seat on an ornate chair looted from the manor above before they destroyed it. He let out a long, slow breath, purging the residual rage and once again taking control of himself.

"I'm sorry you had to put up with that," Zato said to Timos. "I find it best to get all the anger out, rather than let it simmer and compromise my judgement."

“Understandable,” Timos said. “It’s another in a long line of setbacks, but this doesn’t compromise our ultimate plan.”

“A team of adventurers has gotten into the astral space,” Zato said. “All we have there are some unseeded recruits. You’ve seen the reports on the Rejector’s team. I don’t care if our people have double the numbers or if they’ve reached bronze rank. Asano, Geller and their team will tear through them like they were wet paper.”

“It doesn’t matter; their task is done. The beacon was emplaced months ago and the astral tunnel is well on its way to formation. Our astral magic specialists here have assured me that, at this point, the beacon is unnecessary. The tunnel’s destination is affixed. The Rejector can run around all he likes, take our people alive or even destroy the beacon itself. They could have gone into the astral space a month ago and still been too late to stop us. Short of finding us here and stopping the tunnel from this end, there is no keeping us out of the astral space.”

“But they’ll know we’re coming.”

A sinister smile played across Timos’ lips.

“Actually, I made sure the people we sent believe that the beacon is essential to our plans. A little extra precaution I put in place. Asano and his team can go ahead and destroy it and assume that has put paid to our plans. It just frees us up to move in unexpectedly, once the tunnel is finished.”

Zato chuckled.

“You know, I was one of those who looked down on your cautious nature,” he told Timos. “Yet you were the only one who even imagined things could go this badly for us. You have my gratitude.”

“Gratitude enough to let me finally kill Thadwick Mercer?” Timos asked.

“No,” Zato said. “Mercer knows Asano, which could be useful to us.”

“Thinking Thadwick could be of use is a large part of what got us here in the first place,” Timos argued. “I’ve already spoken to him at length about Asano but the petty-minded little scum is so biased that I don’t trust any of what he gave me.”

“Mercer lives,” Zato said firmly. “Why don’t you put that cautious mind of yours to work and see if you can’t find a way to make Thadwick an asset?”

Jason stepped out of the shadow gate. With his astral affinity, dimensional travel powers gave him an enjoyable rush. It seemed to be a lengthier transition than his previous portal experiences, even his previous use of the portal through which they just travelled.

-
- You have entered a zone of high magical saturation. Magical manifestations will occur at an increased rate.
-

Clive had a different opinion, which he demonstrated by stumbling out of the portal, and dropping to all fours and loudly throwing up. The others followed through the portal in quick succession. Humphrey was a practised teleporter himself, but still came out looking peaky.

“That was quite rough,” he said in a strained voice.

Neil came through and ended up in the same condition as Clive. Sophie followed after, giving a sympathetic wince over her beleaguered team mates. Like Jason, she had an astral affinity that made the transition exhilarating, rather than stomach-churning.

“Was Belinda sent to one of the other entrances?” Humphrey wondered aloud. A glance around them was enough to see they were on one of the portal towers that ringed the outside of the city.

“I don’t think so,” Sophie said. “She’s probably just sluggish in peeling herself off of Jory.”

“Good for them,” Jason said happily. “Who doesn’t love love?”

Belinda finally came through the portal, looking unwell but managing to hold down her lunch. By that point, Clive and Neil had crawled away from the mess they had made on the flat brickwork top of the tower. They were sat together, leaning back and looking queasy.

“Once we get that weird magic body like Jason, we stop being able to throw up, right?” Neil asked.

“Yep,” Clive confirmed. “I am now officially looking forward to it.”

“You and me both, brother,” Neil told him.

“We dodged the first arrow,” Humphrey said. “We arrived together and don’t need to regroup.”

“That was actually my main concern,” Jason said, sharing Humphrey’s relief. “Of all the uncertain threats here, my biggest fear was facing them in isolation.”

“We aren’t all well-suited to solitary operation, no,” Clive agreed. Being separated reduced their potential answers to any given situation. This was the largest potential threat they had foreseen, because it made every other threat more dangerous. They had made a number of contingency preparations for that eventuality, including tracking stones for all but Jason, who was untraceable.

“So, we don’t need the tracking stones for each other,” Neil said.

“They may be useful if we end up separated for some reason,” Humphrey said. “Keep them on hand. We should take a look at the ones we have for the cultists.”

“Speaking of which,” Neil said, “why couldn’t we check them from outside the astral space? Isn’t that how they knew the expedition had gone wrong? Tracking stones for the people in the desert astral space?”

“The difference is the astral spaces themselves,” Clive explained. “The desert astral space is naturally formed and has many, perpetually open apertures. The dimensional wall between our world and that astral space is paper thin, filled with holes. This astral space, by contrast, is artificially stabilised and very difficult to penetrate. It’s a rock face you need to drill through, hence the trouble we had returning.”

“That means they’ll need to find a different way to separate this astral space from our world, right?” Belinda asked. “Not the same technique they used before.”

“Almost certainly,” Clive said. “I have no idea what that will entail, however. It could be easier or could be harder. This astral space is smaller than the desert one. It’s one of the things we need to figure out.”

“We’re getting ahead of ourselves,” Humphrey said. “We should approach things in order. First, we take stock. Where are we and what is our situation? I’m concerned about the ambient magic.”

Most perception powers enhanced magical senses and aura senses somewhere in the first three ranks, along with a third power that was a precursor to the more unique upper-rank effects. For Jason that was seeing through darkness, for Neil it was sensing vulnerabilities. Humphrey already had both their magical and aura senses enhanced. Everyone but Sophie and Belinda had their perception powers at bronze already, with only Sophie lacking the enhanced magic senses. She wouldn’t have them until silver rank, when Neil and Jason would have their aura senses enhanced.

“I can feel all the extra magic in the air,” Jason said. “I figured that was normal. This place had always had a higher magical saturation, right?”

“Yes,” Clive said, “but the last time we came here, the magical density was the same as the Greenstone region. It’s now higher.”

“I didn’t realise that was even possible,” Jason said. He had never experienced a zone of different magical density, so he hadn’t recognised the change.

“Can you explain that for the guy who studied healing magic instead of astral magic?” Neil asked.

“Or the person who never studied magic at all,” Sophie added.

“Magical saturation is how much magic there is,” Clive explained. “It determines how many monsters, essences and awakening stones manifest. A monster surge is a temporary period of heightened magical saturation, which is why so many monsters appear.”

“Magical density is the quality of the magic,” Belinda said, picking up the explanation. “It determines that the rank of monsters that manifest, along with a bunch of other things. What rituals can be performed, whether certain magic items can function.”

“The heightened saturation we were expecting,” Clive said. “An increase in magical density means that all the monsters we’ll be facing will be more powerful than we thought. It also means they’ll stay around for longer. An iron-rank monster will naturally break back down into magic after a month. Depending on how long ago this change happened, the astral space could be thick with more powerful monsters that have been manifesting without breaking down.”

“How powerful do you think?” Humphrey asked, looking at the air around them. “I’d guess the new standard is low bronze.”

“I’d say that’s about right,” Clive said. “Greenstone’s density is about mid-iron, which is very low.”

“What do you mean by mid-iron?” Neil asked.

“Oh, that’s just a rating for the most common kind of monster that will appear. In Greenstone, iron-rank monsters are easily the most common, with semi-regular bronze and only very rare silvers. What we’re looking at here will mostly be low-end bronze, with some high-end of iron and bronze sprinkled in. Encountering a silver-rank monster will still be unusual, but with how many monsters we’re going to see, it’s an inevitability. Hopefully we’ll be strong enough to fight it by that point, or at least to run away.”

“We could chum Asano and have him lure it away,” Neil said.

“Because of his evasive abilities,” Humphrey said, nodding.

“Uh, sure, that’s why,” Neil said. Jason gave Neil a flat look, who wiggled his eyebrows back at him.

“We knew we would be dealing with unknown dangers,” Humphrey said. “This is just the first. If anything, the monsters being more powerful than we anticipated will be better for our advancement.”

“I think we may be missing the forest for the trees here,” Jason said. “More importantly than the monsters, something is raising the magical density of this astral space. That should be a foundational element of any patch of physical reality, right?”

“That’s right,” Clive said. “Altering it in an astral space would be orders of magnitude easier than a true world, but even so, the forces involved are disconcerting, to say the least.”

“It has to be something to do with what the Builder cult is up to,” Humphrey said. “I suggest we go find them and ask.”

Chapter 224

Fate Can't Wait to Kill Us All

The astral space was an island city of ancient stone buildings, reclaimed by jungle. Broad boulevards were covered in vines, grass growing up between displaced pavers. Buildings that were three, four, even five storeys tall, ranging from nearly intact to little more than rubble strewn around the lush, verdant greenery. Strange, magical plants could be seen. Bulbous, purple growths, adhering to the sides of buildings. Huge, towering trees, incongruent with the jungle around them. They stretched up, higher than any of the buildings, clutching at the sky with leafy fingers.

As they had in their initial foray into the city, the team had arrived on one of the portal towers that ringed the outer edge of the city. Situated where the island shore met the water, each tower had an archway akin to the one through which they had arrived. Their's was still open, an obsidian arch filled with dark energy. There was something eerie about the power within it. Not a mere absence of light, but a void that sought to devour it.

Jason's power allowed ten travellers before the power was expended. It remained active, only seven having passed through, including Stash. Perched on Humphrey's head in the form of a small bird, Stash was bobbing his head around with curiosity. The transit did not seem to have impacted the little dragon at all.

"So, who built this city?" Neil asked. "I mean, did this used to be a chunk of world, like the ones the Builder keeps tearing off? Or did someone come along and build this huge city in this astral space? Was is that order of assassins?"

"It was not," Shade said, emerging from Jason's shadow. "This city was as you see it when the Order of the Reaper first discovered this place and began working to stabilise it. Even these towers, which were used to connect it to your world, were already in place, waiting to be used."

"They were already here?" Clive asked. "We've been postulating that the primary function of the towers was to serve as the connection to our world. If they predate the people who used them that way, then it suggests that this astral space was attached to another reality in the past, or perhaps to ours and was severed somehow. Oh, that's fascinating."

"Fascination is a luxury for later," Humphrey said. "What matters is the Builder cult."

"That may be what I'm talking about," Clive said. "We already know that the cult has access to astral magic that makes our own look like a child's sand drawings. What we're talking about, with this astral space, is reality engineering. The Builder is the greatest

reality engineer is existence and beyond. Is the Builder trying to claim this astral space, or reclaim it? Where did the Order of the Reaper get the knowledge to do what they did here? It wasn't from our world."

"Are you suggesting that the Order of the Reaper, or perhaps even the Reaper itself, somehow stole this astral space from the Builder?" Jason asked.

"I wouldn't engage in that kind of postulation without significantly more to go on," Clive said. "I need to examine this tower, quite thoroughly."

"Not yet," Belinda reminded Clive. "The portal, first."

"Right, yes."

Belinda still served as Clive's on and off research assistant, although the stipend that earned her was inconsequential, relative to adventuring money. She had proven good for Clive, as she was very detail oriented, while he liked to careen from one big idea to the next.

His previous assistants had never been able to meet Clive's standards, leading to clashes and problems. There were reasons he had never advanced beyond Greenstone in spite of his talent. Belinda helped him bring ideas to fruition instead of getting bogged down in the details he had been dismissive of, while she found, in Clive, an enthusiastic magical tutor. As Jason well knew, Clive was downright ebullient when it came to sharing the study of magic.

Clive and Belinda went over to examine the still-open portal. They needed to know if it was safe to return to their own world, and how easy it would be to reopen the portal from this side. They set out a series of carved stones around the portal. They looked like dice; six-sided cubes with a sigil engraved onto each face.

Clive took a pair of wands, handing one to Belinda, and they started waving them about. The cubes floated up into the air and started turning, over and over until they stopped again, one of the engravings of each cube lighting up. Clive hastily scribbled in a notebook before the pair started waving their wands again.

"I would strongly advise against trying to go back through this portal," Clive said after several sequences of this.

"It seems normal," Humphrey said. "As much as any of this is. It looks like Jason's portal power."

"But it isn't," Clive said. "We used Jason's power to incite the portal into opening, but this is not Jason's ability, whatever it may look like. This archway was able to serve as an anchor, allowing the portal to originate from the other side. Whatever power is affecting the ambient magic of the city is having a disruptive effect on anything originating on this side,

though. Trying to go back from this side, even though this already-open portal, would be less like stepping through a door and more like jumping into a meat grinder.”

“So, we’re trapped here?” Neil asked.

“I don’t know about trapped,” Clive said. “Everything we learned while figuring out how to open the portal suggested that leaving should be much easier than intruding in the first place. If I can determine what is going on with the magic, I’m confident I can compensate for it. We can likely trigger the exit without even needing Jason’s power to get things started.”

“We have to assume that whatever is affecting the magic is part of what the cult are doing,” Humphrey said.

“Yes,” Clive said. “The first step to solving this puzzle is figuring that out and finding a way to stop it.”

“I vote we start by killing them all and go from there,” Sophie said.

“You’re probably right,” Jason said with resignation in his voice. “We need to question them, if we can, but I don’t see a diplomatic resolution as a likely outcome.”

“It’s never good, going in knowing that you’re going to be killing people,” Humphrey said. “You shielded the team from that before, Jason, but I won’t let you, this time. We’re adventurers, and adventurers fight monsters, even when they’re people. We all need to come to terms with that.”

Belinda and Neil shared a look, neither having killed anyone before. The others gave them sober but encouraging smiles of reassurance.

“I’d like to start by investigating this tower quite thoroughly,” Clive said. “They are most likely the medium for whatever the cult are up to.”

“Alright,” Humphrey said. “How long will that take?”

“I know this isn’t a great answer,” Clive said, “but it’ll take as long as it takes. Once I’ve started, I can probably get you a better estimate.”

“Once *we’ve* started,” Belinda corrected.

“Just so,” Clive agreed.

The others were at loose ends as Clive started pulling out magical paraphernalia him and Belinda to use. They ended up sitting at the edge of the tower, legs dangling over the side.

With the strange beauty of the overgrown city laid out before him, Jason took a deep breath of the hot, heavy air. It was rich with the scent of plants and earth, mixing with a gentle, salty breeze coming off the water. He had mastered the art of not breathing but he

did it anyway, for the pure pleasure of the sensation. He relished the feel of the warm sun on his skin.

"I know we're here to fight evil and whatnot," Jason said, "but damn if I don't love this job, sometimes."

Jason spotted the rest of the team sharing a glance.

"What's that about," he asked.

"It's just good to see a real smile," Neil said. "You've been forcing them for a while now, which takes a lot of the fun out of mocking you."

Sophie thumped Neil on the arm.

"Hey..." Neil complained.

Before Clive and Belinda started their investigation, Humphrey had Clive take out the tracking stones for the cultists. They didn't expect to get actual locations, since not only were the cultists most likely bronze-rank after all this time, but the tracking stones traced their Adventure Society badges, not the people themselves.

"They might still have their badges," Clive said. "They needed them to get in here in the first place. Remember Emir's people checking the aura signatures on them against Magic Society records?"

"Once they stayed behind, they new their Adventure Society days were done," Neil said. "I bet they tossed their badges away the second they got here."

Whether the Cultists kept their badges or not, the tracking stones would at least keep track of who was alive or dead. Even after their aura signature changed enough from ranking up to desynchronise them from their badges,

"Five of them are dead," Clive said.

"That's a big win for us," Sophie said. "It went from six on thirteen to six on eight."

"Don't go thinking that makes things easy," Humphrey warned as he saw the lack of activity from the stones. "The rest aren't tracking, which means they're bronze-rank."

"Or they got turned into flesh abominations," Belinda added.

"Yes," Humphrey agreed. "Even if they aren't the strongest essence users, the tyranny of rank is not something to be dismissive of. We all watched Jason take out one bronze-rankers, but that was just one. A whole cluster of them together is a multiplicative danger, not an additive one."

"Humphrey, you've given us this speech before," Neil pointed out. "So has your Mother, your sister, Mr Bahadir, Gabriel Remore..."

“And you’ll hear it again before we’re done because it matters,” Humphrey said. “I’m bringing every single one of you out of this place alive.”

“Don’t say things like that,” Jason admonished. “That’s a huge death flag. You might as well pull out a picture of your girl from back home, explain that you’re about to be a father and that you’re two days away from retirement.”

“Jason, this is serious,” Humphrey said.

“I am serious,” Jason said. “How would you feel if I said that nothing can possibly go wrong?”

“Definitely don’t say that,” Neil said.

“Don’t go tempting fate,” Sophie agreed. “Fate can’t wait to kill us all.”

Clive and Belinda almost seemed to be going over the huge tower brick by huge brick, starting with the top of the tower and making their way down the stairs that wound their way around the outside. Despite the size of the tower, there was no apparent way inside, or any indication whether it was solid or hollow.

“This is really what we’re doing?” Neil complained. “All this build up over going back into the astral space, squaring off against monsters and cultists, and what are we doing? Standing around while Clive looks at bricks.”

“That’s Neil you can hear whinging,” Jason said into a recording crystal. There was a long gap in Jason’s recording crystal travelogue, from just before his kidnapping until he finally felt ready to resume them.

Neil walked over to peer into the recording crystal.

“Jason’s family,” Neil said. “Next time you are going to send us someone, send us someone better. You have a brother, right, Jason?”

“Sod off,” Jason said, pushing Neil out of frame.

Sophie was meditating, knowing that her aura control was not as strong as most of the team. Humphrey patrolled the edge of the tower, looking out for threats. At his heels, Stash was transforming into a series of increasingly adorable puppies. Occasionally he would change into something stranger, such as a replica of one of the Berts, but with a huge moustache.

“I’m really one person pretending to be a lot!” Stash declared enthusiastically.

“Stash!” Humphrey scolded. “What did I say? The Bertinelli brothers are all different people.”

“No!” Stash yelled, turning back into a puppy and sprinting to jump into the lap of Sophie, in her meditative pose. She smiled without opening her eyes, reaching down to scratch the puppy behind the ears as he snuggled into her.

Belinda returned to the top of the tower, calling everyone together. They gathered up and followed her down the stairs to the base of the tower, where Clive was using his power to draw out an incredibly sophisticated ritual diagram on the wall.

“What did you find?” Humphrey asked.

“I’m not sure,” Clive said absently, still drawing the diagram. He waved his finger in the air like a pen and golden lines appeared within the diagram to match. “Some kind of hidden door, although I can’t tell if it’s a cupboard or the whole thing is empty.”

Eventually Clive finished the diagram and chanted out an opening spell. A section of wall soundlessly slid back into the tower and slid up, revealing a large, dark space beyond. The others could make out a shape from the light coming through door, only Jason seeing clearly. He stepped up and looked around the interior of what turned out to be the hollow tower. He realised what the looming shape taking up most of the space was and his eyes went wide.

“What is that?” Humphrey asked, peering into the dark.

The lump of metal the size of a car they were looking at was the front half of a giant, metallic foot.

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.

-
- ??? (world engineer).
 - Construct (diamond rank).

 - ???.
 - ???.
 - ???.
 - ???.
 - ???.
 - ???.
 - ???.
-

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.”

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.

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."

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.

Chapter 226

Greenhouse Flowers

As they anticipated, they reached all twelve towers without encountering the cultists.

“Shouldn’t the pillars be central to what they’re trying to achieve?” Jason asked as they team stood atop the final tower. “Whether it’s trying to sever the connection to the world, or do something with the giant golems inside them, the towers should be key, right?”

“Yes,” Clive said. “Between their absence here and whatever they’re doing to raise the magical density, I find myself extremely concerned. Before we even came in here, we knew that none of the people on our potential cultist list had the kind of astral magic expertise that would be required to truly accomplish anything. There was always the question of how they were going to sever this astral space, but now it seems that there is more to the cult’s scheme than we realised.”

Before they had left, the backgrounds of the suspected cultists had been thoroughly investigated. They were all local, from lower-tier aristocracy or wealthy non-aristocrat families. Because the families involved didn’t have the political clout to stop it, the Adventure Society had scoured the homes and investigated the relations of the suspects for any and all information they could find. Most of the families had no indication of cult activity, while others had already been exposed as cult sympathisers during the purge.

“Our biggest point of confusion was that the people we’re after simply don’t have the skill set to accomplish the cult’s goals, as we understand them,” Clive continued. “Our best guess was that they brought something with them, some manner of artefact or device that could do what they needed. Now, it seems that our ignorance of their objectives was even greater than we thought. We don’t know if they still want to claim the astral space, awaken these constructs or if it’s something to do with the changes to the ambient magic.”

“Are we sure we shouldn’t try destroying one of those constructs?” Neil asked.

“Very,” Clive said. “We wouldn’t be able to, anyway. Even Humphrey and Jason, who can overlook rank disparity in certain regards, wouldn’t be able to damage them. All they would accomplish would be to trigger any defence mechanisms that might be in place. That’s not even considering that the golems might, in some way, be essential to the core function of the towers, which is to stabilise this astral space.”

“The astral space is going to become unstable anyway, though, isn’t it?” Jason asked. “Won’t an unnaturally high level of magical density eventually make the dimensional wall break down?”

“That’s right,” Clive said. “If something is pushing through magic that’s too high-grade for the dimensional wall to endure, it will eventually break down. It’ll take quite a while, by which I mean a decade or longer, but if whatever is causing the change isn’t stopped, it will happen eventually. Even if it is stopped, if that happens too late, the damage will be done.”

“What would the effects of that be?” Humphrey asked.

“If the dimensional wall between the physical reality of this astral space breaks down,” Clive said, “then astral forces will pour in like a tide and wash everything away. This astral space will no longer exist.”

“What would the repercussions of that be for our world?” Humphrey asked.

“Actually, that would be fine for our world,” Clive said, “The astral space would be washed off the side of our world like washing dirt off your arm.”

“That’s not what the Builder wants, though,” Jason said. “He wants to take astral spaces, not destroy them. Especially, I would think, when they’re loaded up with his property.”

“Hopefully the cultists have some answers,” Humphrey said. “If they aren’t in the centre of the city, we’ll just have to start following the soul compass, clearing out the flesh abominations as we find them. Eventually it will lead us to the cultists.”

The team turned their monster-filled trek toward the interior of the city. For the first time, they experienced a rapid shift in the direction the soul compass was pointing. It signalled their proximity to what, unsurprisingly, turned out to be a flesh abomination. The abominations outnumbered the cultists by more than fifty to one and the cultists were almost certainly together. The abominations were solitary by nature, aggressively lashing out at any living thing they encountered. That left them scattered all around the city, compared to whatever rock the cultists were hiding under.

Given that fighting the abominations was one of their explicit goals in returning to the astral space, they had given some consideration to how to do so. The abominations had two advantages, being their ability to adapt and the power of an upper-tier bronze-rank monster. The weaknesses the team sought to exploit was a lack of intelligence and the fact that while it could adapt, it always remained a creature of living flesh.

The first weakness they hoped to exploit by ‘confusing’ the monster’s adaptations, alternating modes of attack to soak up time as it changed back and forth. To do this, the plan was to have Sophie and Humphrey repeatedly switch off against the monster, forcing it to adapt alternately to her speed and then to his power. The hope was that doing so would prevent a singular adaptation it could use to effectively fight the team.

The purpose in stalling out the fight was to exploit the abomination's second weakness, the inability to overcome Jason's afflictions. They knew from fighting one previously that it would adapt to prevent itself from losing combat effectiveness, but that eventually there would be a threshold beyond which it could no longer sustain itself.

The abomination was lairing in an old church, although not one of any god the team recognised. What little remained of the iconography was wholly unfamiliar, and they had little time to examine it before the abomination sensed their presence. They waited outside where they could take advantage of the open space and have the bulk of the team at a safe remove. It was a large, blobby mass of pink and yellow flesh, ambling out onto the street on four stubby legs.

The abomination's inactive state was its weakest, when it was slow and soft, which Jason took full advantage of. He opened with spells and then followed with special attacks, using his shadow arm to keep his distance. He laid on his afflictions with practised efficiency as the abomination was already changing its form in response.

As Jason danced around it, casting spells and reaching out with special attacks, the abomination grew tentacles, all over its round body, that ended in vicious claws. The result looked like a Lovecraftian echidna, the flexible limbs lashing too try and catch Jason wherever he went.

By the time the creature truly got going, Jason's job was done and he cleanly teleported away. Communicating through voice chat, Humphrey teleported in, directly taking his place. The quick and flexible limbs, useful for pinning down the elusive Jason, lacked the strength to dig through Humphrey's armour as he launched himself forward, burying his sword in the abomination's side.

The creature reacted by growing thick, chitinous plates that would protect it, while the many limbs consolidated into fewer larger, more powerful ones. These were also covered in chitin; resembling long, sharp, preying mantis arms. The completion of its adaptation signalled Humphrey's departure, as he teleported out again. In his place, Sophie rushed in like a storm to face the now sluggish, heavily-plated creature.

The creature swung its powerful limbs at her. They weren't slow, but it took more than not slow to catch Sophie. She deftly avoided them as she attacked the plated body with fists and feet. Her attacks were not as powerful as Humphrey's, but the resonating-force power her abilities added to her unarmed strikes was able to penetrate the heavy armour.

It seemed like everything would go perfectly to plan as Sophie and Humphrey switched off in rapid succession, forcing the monstrosity into continuous adaptation. It became evident it would not be quite so easy as it first seemed, however, as the

abomination's adaptations became more and more refined. Slowly it transmogrified into a lean, insect-like creature with strong plates but agile limbs, hard to catch and hard to hurt.

It had two, whip-like tendrils with segmented shards of razor-sharp chitin. They thrashed and danced, strong enough to hurt Humphrey, yet swift and unpredictable enough to catch Sophie. Neil threw out shields and healing from a safe distance but the fight was slowly turning against them. The longer the fight went on, the closer the abomination came to finding the perfect combination of traits.

The fight seemed of the verge of flipping against them as the abomination continued to morph itself into the perfect weapon. Sophie and Humphrey were desperately fighting together, as Clive and Belinda added their support. They had been holding off for the most dangerous moment, not wanting the abomination to have adapted when they came in at a critical point.

Clive opened up with his powerful attack spell, then unleashed it a second and third time with Belinda's help. Before she then copied it to use herself. Clive's spell was slow and difficult to use, but one of the advantages as it could attack in multiple ways.

Ability: [Wrath of the Magister] (Magic)

- Spell (fire, magic, curse, poison, wounding, ice, dimension)
 - Cost: Moderate mana plus additional mana per effect.
 - Cooldown: 1 minute.

 - Current rank: Iron 9 (61%).

 - Effect (iron): Lock a prismatic beam onto an enemy. Expend additional mana to alter the target's reality, using any combination of the available colour effects. This cannot be used in conjunction with the other variant of this spell, which requires an alternate incantation.

 - Effect (iron): Lock a prismatic beam onto an enemy. Expend additional mana to unmake reality in a localised area, creating an annihilating void sphere inside the target. This effect requires magic to be channelled into the target at an extreme mana cost until sufficient mana has been channelled to trigger the effect.

 - [Red] (high mana): Target's temperature is significantly increased (frost burn if combined with blue).
 - [Yellow] (high mana): Target's abilities have increased mana cost.
 - [Pink] (moderate mana): Target's resistances are reduced.
 - [Green] (moderate mana): Target's blood is poisonous to itself.
 - [Purple] (very high mana): Expending mana harms the target.
 - [Orange] (very high mana): Target suffers increased damage from all sources.
 - [Blue] (high mana): Target's temperature is significantly decreased (frost burn if combined with red).
-

Clive had various abilities that gave him a larger mana pool than most adventurers of his rank. Knowing that he would only be casting a few spells, he went all out. His first casting of the spell reduced the abomination's resistances, made its own blood poisonous and made it take more damage from all sources. The second spell combined heat and cold into a potent frost burn effect, stronger than either individually. His third spell used the void sphere variation to devastating effect, Belinda following up immediately with a second one.

The overwhelming barrage of magic pushed the abomination over the edge. The chitin was scored and cracked from the frost burn, while chunks were missing altogether, the annihilation sphere carving them out like scoops of ice cream. No longer able to hold back the afflictions, the creature collapsed on the ground, dark filth spilling out like a rotten egg that had been cracked open.

The team had seen some graphic things in their time, but the miserable, rotting demise of the flesh creature was especially hard to watch. The stench that struck them after was even worse, a near match for the rainbow smoke of a monster dissolving.

"It's hard to imagine that thing used to be a person," Neil said.

"It's about as bad an end as I can imagine," Clive said. "A prison of rage and madness built from your own twisted body. The only escape you can hope for is the release of death, yet you cannot die until someone brings about your violent demise."

"It's good that we're doing this," Sophie said. "I've had my share of bad situations, but nothing like this. I'm glad we can help them."

The rest of the team nodded their sombre agreement.

"Thank you," Shade said. "Most of these abominations have been suffering for centuries."

"One down, a few hundred to go," Humphrey said. "We have a lot of work ahead of us."

The island city was a roughly circular forty kilometres across. If not for the streets being overrun by monster-filled jungle, it would be a matter of hours to reach the centre. During the trials, the teams had all taken their time, testing themselves against the environment and seeking out treasure, knowing they had the time to do so. Jason and his team took a more direct approach, but were careful.

They could have taken hours if they pushed it, or teleported directly in. Clive, Jason and Humphrey each could have taken them into the building they had rested in while awaiting the final stage of the trials, which would have been a relatively safe place to

arrive. While hidden from the eyes of any cultists present, though, there would be no hiding the ostentatious magic of a portal opening from their magical senses. Given that the cultists were bronze-rank now, they would have as many people with enhanced magic senses as Jason and his team.

Their time in the astral space was increasingly an ordeal. Every day had been an endless slog of monsters, from the numerous to the powerful, and the team was rapidly becoming exhausted. One evening, as the team rested in the cloud house, Jason and Humphrey were sitting together on the roof.

“At some stage, we’ll need to stop for a rest day,” Humphrey said.

“Just hide out in the cloud house and recover?” Jason asked.

“Exactly,” Humphrey said. “This ongoing pressure is good for our advancement, but I don’t want to go past the point it stops driving us forward and starts dragging us down.”

“I don’t think we’re there yet,” Jason said. “These monsters are either bronze-rank or a crowd of iron-ranks, so it’s been driving the team to rely on each other more. If we’re ever going to have the kind of teamwork that Valdis’ team has, we need that.”

“I don’t want to come into a conflict with the cultists when the team is blunted from overuse,” Humphrey said. “I want to meet them while we’re a freshly-sharpened knife. Does that mean refreshed from a well earned rest, though, or in a strong rhythm, on the back of a series of successful monster fights?”

“Ask Neil,” Jason said. “He’s our healer and he does his job well. He pays more attention to the condition of the team than anyone.”

Humphrey nodded.

“You’re right,” he said. “One of the last pieces of advice my mother gave me before we left was to rely on the team. She said I shouldn’t fall into the trap of trying to do everything myself. I suppose that isn’t just restricted to combat, is it?”

“No,” Jason said. “It’s a trap we could both easily fall into. I’ve learned the hard way that I’m not always as clever and insightful as I think I am.”

He let out a sigh, heavy with regret.

“I’ve been thinking about Thadwick a lot,” Jason said. “I’ve come to realise that he and I are very similar.”

“Really?” Humphrey asked.

“Yes,” Jason said. “We share the same flaws. Arrogance, vanity, being self-impressed and having a need to show off. The real difference between us is that I’ve had people to slap some sense into me, where the people around him just reinforced the idea that he was special. His mother was off adventuring for most of his life and his father was

grooming him as heir. His head was filled with how great and important he was going to be, without tempering it with humility. He never had the sense of responsibility your mother drilled into you, or the friends that pull me back into line when I go too far off the rails.”

“I suppose I can see it,” Humphrey said. “Perhaps Thadwick saw it too. Maybe that’s why he was so fixated on you.”

“That makes sense,” Jason said. “I eventually realised that the reason I took such a dislike to Thadwick is that but for sycophancy, there goes I.”

“Things have worked out for you a lot better than they have for Thadwick,” Humphrey said.

“Thadwick is what we call a greenhouse flower, in my world,” Jason said. “Outside of the specific environment in which he was raised, he withers. He was never taught to withstand rough weather.”

“I had some of that, too,” Humphrey said. “I think my mother regrets how much she shielded me from.”

“I’m the same,” Jason said. “My homeland is much safer than this world. My family has money, not like yours, but enough to live better lives than most. For you and I, though, there was always someone who recognised that we would have to make our own way, sooner or later. They prepared us for that. For Thadwick, his parents always intended to make his way for him, and he paid the price of that.”

“You still feel sorry for him, after all that he’s done?” Humphrey said. “Trying to kill you, running off to the Builder cult?”

“I do,” Jason said.

“Do you think there’s a path to redemption for him?”

“No,” Jason said. “He’s gone too far, done too much. His choices have hurt too many. There’s no way back for him, now.”

Chapter 227

A Man Transformed

The team congratulated Jason as another of his abilities reached bronze rank during his evening meditation. As they were all perpetually using the party interface, they had shared the notification.

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- Ability [Blade of Doom] (Doom) has reached Iron 9 (100%).
 - Ability [Blade of Doom] (Doom) has reached Bronze 0 (00%).
 - Ability [Blade of Doom] (Doom) has gained a new effect.
 - Ability [Blade of Doom] (Doom) has gained the [Curse], [Disease] and [Poison] subtypes.

Ability: [Blade of Doom] (Doom)

- Conjunction (unholy, curse, disease, poison).
 - Cost: Moderate mana.
 - Cooldown: None.
 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
 - Effect (iron): Conjures [Ruin, the Blade of Tribulation]. Attacks made with Ruin will inflict an instance of [Vulnerable] and refresh any wounding effects on the target. Wounding effects refreshed by Ruin require more healing than normal to negate. Ruin is an unholy object.
 - Effect (bronze): Ruin inflicts one instance each of [Ruin of the Blood], [Ruin of the Flesh] and [Ruin of the Spirit].
 - [Vulnerable] (affliction, unholy, stacking): All resistances are reduced. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Consumed to cleanse instances of [Resistant] on a 1:1 basis.
 - [Ruin of the Blood] (damage-over-time, poison, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until poison is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
 - [Ruin of the Flesh] (damage-over-time, disease, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until poison is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
 - [Ruin of the Spirit] (damage-over-time, curse, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until poison is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

“That’s a strong boost to your short-term damage output,” Clive said. “It’s not the same as a direct damage power, but for weaker enemies, a quick handful of damaging afflictions will let you spread a lot of misery in not a lot of time.”

“That will help you a lot against groups,” Humphrey agreed. “That’s always been an issue for you because it took more time than it was worth to layer afflictions. Now you can put, what? Four damage afflictions with a simple cut from your dagger?”

“It’s probably for the best you’re not evil,” Neil said. “You’re not evil, right?”

“No, I’m not evil,” Jason said.

“Because you seem evil. With your powers.”

“Well, I’m not.”

“That’s good to know,” Neil said. “Thankfully, someone evil wouldn’t lie about that. Oh, wait...”

“You realise who is at the top of my list if I really am evil, right?” Jason asked.

“The guy who bought out the cheesemonger on Maple Street and replaced it with a building supply store?” Neil suggested

“Oh yeah. I hate that guy.”

Clive was standing atop a broken spire as monsters swarmed towards it like a river. They were akin to apes, but leaner and with longer legs. They approached the tower on which he stood with a quick, semi-quadrupedal lope.

Clive was standing on what had once been the interior of a tower-top, now exposed on all sides with the walls and roof long gone. Under his feet, the floor glowed with a ritual circles drawn by his power in lines of golden light. It was the result of the bronze-rank variant of his strong attack spell.

Ability: [Wrath of the Magister] (Magic)

- Spell/ritual (fire, magic, curse, poison, wounding, ice, dimension)
- Cost: Varies.
- Cooldown: Varies.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%)

- Effect (bronze): Create a ritual circle in which the magical attacks of spells, staves and wands have increased effect. This effect has a very high mana cost and a one hour cooldown.

Rather than enhancing what was already a potent and versatile attack spell, the bronze-rank variant offered another means to enhance combat effectiveness. Clive was

wielding one of his two legendary set weapons, the wand and the staff, in each hand. At the end of each were more ritual circles, floating in the air like magical barrel attachments.

Ability: [Tools of the Magister] (Magic)

- Special ability/ritual.
 - Cost: Varies.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%)

 - Effect (iron): Utilise specialty magic tools, vehicles and weapons.

 - Effect (bronze): Use a ritual circle to enhance the magical attack of a staff or wand. This variant requires high mana.
-

Clive unleashed bolts from his staff that hurtled into the approaching monsters. He wasn't even really aiming as he essentially hip-fired the staff, gripping it in one hand and tucked into his armpit. Whether the bolts hit the ground or a monster, the results were explosive, throwing out splinters of wood and stone from the overgrown environment, or chunks of aggressively disincorporated monster.

In his other hand, his wand emitted a continuous beam that he worked back and forth through the monsters with little more accuracy than the staff. Normally the wand required continual focus to be deadly, but the enhanced beam sliced through the monsters in a sweeping line, lopping off limbs or killing outright.

Through a far-seeing crystal, Jason and the rest of the team watched on. To Jason's eyes, Clive had turned the broken spire into a sci-fi beam tower from an RTS. The monsters were undeterred by their losses, however, and continued their zerg rush at Clive's position.

"I can see why he had you bait them now," Jason said to Sophie. She was freshly returned from lured the monsters in Clive's direction.

"He's making a mess, but he's rather imprecise," Humphrey observed. "They'll start climbing that tower any moment."

"I imagine that's what his backup is for," Belinda said.

Just as Humphrey said, the monsters reached the tower and started to climb, for which the ape-like creatures were well-suited. As they did, a large, round figure floated slowly through the air from behind the tower.

Clive's familiar, Onslow, drifted ponderously into view, suspended in the sky on a cushion of shimmering air. Now bronze rank, he was roughly the size and shape of a Volkswagen Beetle, with more runes engraved into his shell than ever before.

The rune tortoise started blasting the creatures climbing up with elemental attacks, sourced from the runes on his shell. An explosive bolt of flame blasted several off at once, while a bolt of lightning chained from one to another to another, sending them screaming off the side. A dark, heavy cloud rose up from Onslow's shell, growing larger than the tortoise itself, and started peppering the side of the tower with water bullets. They weren't very lethal, even to the iron-rank monsters, but did serve to dislodge them, while also leaving the stone of the tower wet and harder to climb.

Clive continued blasting away at the main force of the monsters, which was rapidly thinning out, as Onslow continued to pick off the stragglers. There was a brief pause as Onslow floated up to Clive, who used his own mana to recharge the runes on Onslow's shell before the pair returned to action.

Even though most of their number were cut down before even reaching the tower, the monsters continued, unabated. The team, watching from a distance, had been poised to jump in at any time. When Clive told them he wanted to face the horde alone, they were wary but accepting. Now they just looked on in amazement at the pyrotechnic display as the monsters charged into a futile death.

"Well, damn," Sophie said.

"Won't all this get a lot of attention?" Neil asked.

"Probably," Humphrey said. "Anything with even a modicum of sense will take one look at this and run in the other direction, though."

In amongst the several dozen iron rank monsters were two larger, bronze-rank variants. Clive seemed to ignore them as they reached the spire and started rapidly climbing. Onslow didn't react either, other than to float further away from the tower. As the first one reached the top, Clive used his switch-teleport power.

Ability: [Juxtapose] (Balance)

- Special ability.
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 1 minute.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Swap the location of two allies and/or enemies. You must be able to see both subjects of the spell. If an ally resists or otherwise prevents the effect, this ability is negated but the cooldown is reduced to 30 seconds.

- Effect (bronze): Enemies affected by this ability take additional damage from all sources for a brief period.

The monster vanished, with Onslow appearing in its place. Now in the air where Onslow had been, the monster fell, wildly flailing its limbs. It landed hard, right on one of Clive's invisible rune traps. The trap triggered, sending the monster, or at least the parts that used to be a monster, back into the air and scattering them over the battlefield. A few moments later, smaller explosions rang out where the larger chunks of monster had fallen.

Ability: [Rune Trap] (Rune)

- Spell.
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 1 minute.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Create an explosive rune that will disappear after a short period. The rune can be set to trigger by proximity, caster trigger, or both.

- Effect (bronze): Enemies affected by the rune trap will be the source of a secondary explosion after a brief period.

The second monster crested the tower and launched a huge fist at Clive. The air around the ape-like creature's fist shimmered, much like the cushion holding up Onslow. The fist crashed in on Clive like a hammer, striking the shield around Clive which briefly became visible as it sucked up Clive's mana to withstand the blow.

Clive shoved his wand between his teeth and his now empty hand turned mirror-silver. The air around it shimmered, just as the monster's had, and he rammed his fist into the hairy monster's torso. Despite the lanky man punching a monster at least three times

his weight, the monster went sailing off the spire. Clive quickly aimed and blasted out a shot from his staff, hitting the monster in mid air.

The red of life force emerged from Clive's body, a tendril snaking out and into the rune circle that was floating at the edge of his staff. The golden lines of the ritual circle transformed into an angry, bloody crimson.

Ability: [Blood Magic] (Balance)

- Special ability.
- Cost: Varies.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Consume an amount of your own life force to replenish your mana.

- Effect (bronze): Consume an amount of your life force to enhance the effect of an active ritual.

The next blast that emerged from the staff was much larger than those that had come before. The energy bolt hit the monster at the same time the monster hit the ground, from which it did not get up.

By this point, the iron rank monsters were a scattered remnant of the original horde, but the wildly aggressive creatures kept rampaging forward in the face of inevitable destruction. When the last of them were dead, Clive hopped lightly onto Onslow's shell, sitting cross-legged as the tortoise floated back to the team. The familiar's new flight ability was much faster when hovering close to the ground, so Onslow dropped low and floated just over the bodies of the dead monsters as they made their return to the team.

Clive arrived at the ruined building where the team had been watching from hiding. He lightly slid down Onslow's shell, wand held casually in one hand and staff slung over one shoulder.

"You know," he told the waiting team, "I'm starting to think I might not be too bad at this."

The night before they expected to reach the centre of the city, the team was doing their evening meditation. Jason was leading Neil, Sophie, Belinda and Humphrey in the Dance of the Sword Fairy, a meditation technique that incorporated dance-like physical movements using a sword as a focus. It was something that Rufus had taught to him and had proven one of the more successful techniques for Sophie.

Clive was outside, having made preparations for his anticipated ascension to bronze. He had set aside a space for the messy transition, picking a spot inside some ruins near the cloud house. He had stripped down to his underwear and placed fresh clothes where he could reach them later. Close to hand was one of Jason's precious few bottles of undiluted crystal wash.

Clive was settled into some soft moss, meditating.

"No, Onslow, don't eat the moss. That's my seat."

Clive called Onslow back into the tattoo on his torso before resuming meditation.

When he crossed the final threshold, the rest of the team knew immediately.

-
- Ability [Vengeance Mirror] (Karmic) has reached Iron 9 (100%).
 - Ability [Vengeance Mirror] (Karmic) has reached Bronze 0 (00%).
 - Ability [Vengeance Mirror] (Karmic) has gained a new effect.

Ability: [Vengeance Mirror] (Karmic)

- Special ability.
- Cost: Varies.
- Cooldown: None.
- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): Replicate the last spell or special attack used on you by an enemy. Mana cost is determined by the ability replicated. You may still use this ability if the triggering effect was negated by your abilities but not if it was negated by the abilities of an ally. The replicated power functions at the rank of this ability, not the rank of the enemy that originally used it.
- Effect (bronze): Use the replicated ability a second time.

That was just the beginning of a strenuous series of changes.

-
- All [Karmic Essence] abilities have reached [Bronze 0].
 - Linked attribute [Power] has increased from [Iron 9] to [Bronze 0].
 - Progress to bronze rank: 100% (4/4 essences complete).

Amber light started shining from within Clive's body as he felt pressure build up inside him like a balloon inflated toward the point of bursting. The team rushed outside but didn't intrude on his secluded area in the ruins, instead standing back and watching the amber light shine from within.

-
- All your attributes have reached bronze rank.
 - You have reached bronze rank.
 - You have gained resistance to iron-rank and lower damage sources and effects.
 - The potency of your aura has increased.
 - Your aura senses have improved.
-
- Progress to silver rank: 00%.
-

“Oh, this feels amazing,” Clive said through voice chat. “I’m just waiting for the... oh, there it is.”

The sounds coming from Clive’s secluded spot were bad, but nothing compared to the smell. The coughing, spluttering vomit noises were matched by a stench they had all experienced before on reaching iron rank, when their bodies had purged and renewed all the biomass it would immediately replace.

“I wish I hadn’t just got my spirit attribute to bronze,” Neil winced, holding his nose. “The improved senses are not appreciated right now.”

“You should take this as a training opportunity,” Humphrey said. “There are monsters that will use stench against you, so you should adjust now.”

“Tell me that again when you’re smelling this with a bronze-rank sense of smell and maybe I’ll listen.”

The noises stopped and all they could hear was heavy, exhausted breathing.

“You still conscious in there, mate?” Jason called out.

“Yes,” Clive said wearily. He used voice chat again, rather than expend the effort to yell out. “Give me a moment to clean up. I suspect that once I’ve gotten away from the smell, I’m going to be very hungry.”

“No worries,” Jason said. “I’m just going to move the cloud house upwind a bit, and then I’ll set out a feast for a king. A small king; we only had so much space.”

Clive arrived at the slightly relocated cloud house, crystal wash clean and with a fresh set of clothes. He was a man literally transformed; the awkward, lanky frame and hapless, bookish features were gone. In their place was a tall and lean figure with an easy grace to his step and effortlessly appealing facial features.

“You’re the scientist no one listens to at the start of a disaster movie,” Jason said. “Except now you’re at the end of the movie, when you’ve lost your glasses, your hair is attractively tousled, you’ve found the heroism within and realised your unrealistically attractive lab assistant was pining for you the whole time.”

“I’m not even going to try and follow that,” Clive said. “I’ll just assume it’s a compliment and say thank you.”

“Also, I’m not pining,” Belinda said. “I did like the unrealistically attractive part, though. You should try finding a man you like when Sophie’s standing next to you. Thank the gods Jory has depth of character.”

“Are you suggesting people are only interested in my looks?” Sophie asked.

“Of course I’m saying that,” Belinda said. “You’re like a treasure chest full of swords with no handles. It looks enticing, but rummaging about inside is going to get you hurt.”

“Thank you,” Sophie said brightly.

“That was not a compliment!”

“How is that not a compliment?” Sophie asked. “Who doesn’t want to be full of swords?”

“Can we just move on to the food?” Clive asked.

Chapter 228

The Worst Possible Option

With a fully-fledged bronze ranker in their number, the team felt more secure as they made their way to the city's interior. They progressed more swiftly than any of them had during the Reaper trials, for two main reasons. The first was confidence. Rather than scattered across the city and forced into makeshift teams, they had allies they knew and could rely on. Even a powerful ally like Valdis was no substitute for a true comrade when life and death were on the line.

The second reason was that they weren't scouring the place for treasures, although treasures they still found. In spite of the people that had flooded the astral space during the trials, the team still stumbled over a small fortune in awakening stones, essences and other goods. In an old training hall they found an adept essence and a whole rack of bronze-rank magic weapons. None were exceptional, but they were valuable, nevertheless. In a library they found a knowledge essence, plus some skill books whose magic had kept them intact despite the hot, humid air. The normal books had long ago rotted away, making the skill books easy to pick out.

The central region of the city had been clearly demarked into two areas during the trials. The very core of the city was its most intact region, with the jungle prevented from reclaiming it by means unknown. In direct opposition to this, the area that ringed the centremost region was the most heavily reclaimed by jungle, as if all the growth not happening at the centre was somehow piling up around it. The buildings there were little more than rubble, and much of the ruins had been entirely engulfed by jungle.

This ring of thick overgrowth had been the location of the giant carnivorous plant that occupied a staggering amount of space underground. It had been almost entirely annihilated through the efforts of Jason and a large force of adventurers. Only a few dead remnants of the plant monster had remained after it had been annihilated by the transcendent damage of Jason's execute power. His afflictions had never escalated to such a grand scale before, and he considered it unlikely that they ever would again. Creatures the size of a small city weren't easy to come by, and he'd rather avoid fighting any more.

The team paused as they reached the ring of thick jungle.

"You don't suppose it's grown back, do you?" Neil asked.

"It has not," Shade said, his voice coming from Jason's shadow. "Whatever opinion one might have of Mr Casino's abilities, a lack of thoroughness in their lethality is not a

criticism likely to be levelled against them. I can assure you that the blood root vine was quite thoroughly destroyed.”

“We need to be careful, going through this section of jungle,” Humphrey said. “The jungle looks thicker than where I crossed over. From the looks of it, we’ll have to cut our way through in places. It’ll make for slow going and scouting won’t be easy.”

“There’s little point watching from above,” Sophie said. “That canopy is too thick. I could track you by your auras but I don’t know how useful that would be.”

“I don’t think the risk of showing our auras off like that is worth it. We should keep our auras as retracted as we can,” Humphrey said. “We should all stay close until we’re through.”

“Should we look for a place where the growth isn’t so heavy?” Sophie asked. “This is definitely thicker than where we through last time.”

“The growth of this area seems to have rapidly expanded in the absence of the blood root vine,” Shade said. “At the time of the trials, none of the city had jungle this dense. It stands to reason that the rest of the central ring would have experienced similar growth during our absence.”

“Should we reconsider teleporting through?” Neil asked.

“It’s not the worst idea in the world,” Jason said. “Now that I’m looking at this jungle, I don’t fancy hacking our way through. Not when the local monsters are stronger than ever, and you can bet that any manifesting in there will make better use of the environment than we do.”

Humphrey looked into the dense foliage as he considered.

“What does everyone else think?” he asked.

“I’m a city girl,” Belinda said. “If we can skip trudging through all that, then I’m for it.”

“It’s a simple question of risk assessment,” Clive said. “Is going through monster-infested jungle more dangerous than teleporting into what is potentially the very midst of the cultists? Given that we should be able to teleport into an area of relative safety, I would say teleporting is the superior option.”

“And if they sense the magic of us all teleporting in?” Sophie asked.

“Then we fight,” Humphrey said. “We’re going there for that fight, in any case. That said, I would rather initiate it on our own terms.”

“Looks like we have a consensus,” Clive said. “I’ll open a portal to the roof of the building we stayed in before the final trials.”

Clive held out a hand and a circle of runes appeared, alternating blue and gold. Normally they would then fill with shimmering air and a blurred image of the destination, but instead the runes simply blinked out, like someone had pulled the plug on them.

“That’s odd,” Clive said.

“Could portals be somehow impeded here?” Belinda asked.

“That should not be the case,” Shade said, emerging from Jason’s shadow. “That being said, this space has undergone many changes in the months since my tenure here. We have made a number of disconcerting revelations of which I was unaware, so my knowledge of this realm is not as reliable as I believed. If there is some manner of impedance on portals, I believe your power, Mr Asano, has the best chance of retaining functionality. It is the basis for the portals incorporated into this place, after all.”

Jason tried his portal ability, but had no more success than Clive. The obsidian arch appeared, but the shadow gate did not fill with the darkness, instead retreating without activating. Humphrey tried to teleport them, but likewise achieved nothing.

“My short range teleport works fine,” Humphrey said, vanishing and reappearing close by to prove his point. “Jason you haven’t had any issues shadow-jumping, right?”

“It’s been working just fine,” Jason said.

“These results suggest one of three possibilities,” Clive said. “One, as Belinda posited, is some manner of environmental interference. We know that the portals to leave this astral space are currently non-functional. My best guess is that it’s related to the changes in the ambient magic and may be affecting our portal abilities in the same way.”

“That makes sense,” Humphrey said.

“The other possibilities,” Clive continued, “are the usual reasons that portal abilities fail. As we all know, a portal destination must be somewhere the person with the portal ability has visited in the past. They must also be able to clearly visualise that space, however. If the space is too generic to be memorable, or if time and failing memory warp the recollection, it won’t work.”

“That’s why big cities have portal stations,” Humphrey said. “They make them memorable, visually striking places so that they are easy to remember from only a single visit.”

“That makes sense,” Jason said. “When I was finding way points across the desert to portal to for when I travelled to Sky Scar Lake, I had to find landmarks that stood out. I don’t think I could portal to a random patch of desert, just because I happened to have passed through one time.”

“I remember that place quite well, though,” Humphrey said. “I remember the view from the rooftop very vividly. The square full of adventurers, the huge trial tower.”

“Which brings us to the third possibility the portals failed,” Clive said. “If the destination has significantly changed, then the visualisation will be wrong and the portal will fail. It’s not enough to redecorate a room, but if you demolish the building the room is in?”

“Shade, you said the tower has most likely been destroyed already,” Jason said.

“That is correct,” Shade answered. “The dimensional spaces within will likely have collapsed, to destructive effect.”

“It could be that the destruction was widespread enough that our building was badly damaged,” Humphrey said.

“It’s only a few kilometres, right?” Belinda said. “Sophie, couldn’t you air-jump your way up high enough to check?”

“Does it really matter what causing it?” Sophie asked. “Whether the magic has gone weird or the building was knocked down, we can’t do anything about either.”

“You’re right,” Humphrey agreed. “Whatever the reason, portals can’t get us where we want to go. We can do some testing later, but for now, we have to make our way through this jungle. Shade, can we rely on you to do the scouting for us?”

“Of course, Mr Geller. It would be my pleasure to contribute.”

The rough terrain was the result of more than just thick jungle. The ground was wildly uneven, from overgrown piles of rubble to areas where the ground had collapsed into deep holes. The team followed the path of least resistance as best they could, relying on Jason’s map to keep them headed in roughly the right direction. Sometimes it was just too rough, forcing Humphrey to hack their way through the undergrowth with his sword.

“These holes look relatively recent,” Clive observed. “I suspect there may be significant spaces beneath the ground that were previously filled by the plant creature. Jason annihilating it entirely with transcendent damage may have left the ground here unstable.”

“The going definitely wasn’t this rough during the trials,” Humphrey said. “It was definitely easier to find a path through.”

“When we were looking for a way to get past the plant monster,” Jason said, “Jory told me that the plants in this astral space have adapted to feed on the heavy magic saturation. Maybe the plant monster was soaking most of that up and now it’s gone. It could be that the remaining plant life has been gorging, leading to the explosion in growth.”

"I'm more concerned about the monsters," Sophie said.

"What monsters?" Neil asked. "We haven't seen one since we entered this thick patch of jungle."

"Exactly," Sophie said. "The only other time we've gone this long without a monster coming at us is when we've stopped for the night."

"It has been a while," Humphrey agreed. "I would have expected at least some kind of snake monster by now, in terrain like this."

"Maybe we're just lucky," Neil said.

"Or maybe the local monsters know something we don't," Sophie said.

Most of the team were city folk. Jason had grown up in a small beach town, while Neil, Belinda and Sophie were all city folk. Humphrey had mostly grown up in the delta, but the carefully landscaped Geller Estate was hardly the open wilds.

While they had all spent time adventuring in the delta, it was the academic Clive who turned out to be the most comfortable in the terrain. He had grown up in the proper delta, on the family eel farm. He was the surest of foot and the most observant of their surroundings.

Clive was also the most educated about the potential threats, with a knowledge of monsters second only to the Magic Society records he had spent so much time cataloguing. This allowed him to spot something that the others overlooked, and he stopped to examine it.

"What did you find?" Humphrey asked as Clive peered intently at some white residue on a large, green leaf. Clive looked around, spotting more of it.

"Not sure," Clive said. "Some kind of secretion, probably from a monster. This is old, so it's hard to be sure. If you look close, there are some lingering traces of magic."

Most of the team had magical senses, so they joined Clive in peering at the residue.

"I can barely sense it," Neil said. "You have no idea what this could be?"

"I have hundreds of ideas of what this could be," Clive said. "I need more information to shave them down before I'd be comfortable making any kind of guess."

The team continued onward, still not encountering any monsters but occasionally spotting more of the residue. They found some that was fresher, dangling from a tree branch like string. The residual magic on it was stronger and Jason rubbed the substance between his thumb and forefinger.

"Should you be touching that?" Belinda asked. "I'm pretty sure the first rule of dealing with mysterious magical stuff is not to touch it."

"I thought I felt something in the magic," Jason said. "Blood magic."

"And that made you want to touch it?" Neil asked.

"I'm definitely getting a feel of blood magic off of this," Jason said. "Not essence magic, like mine, though. Some kind of monster power."

Humphrey spotted Clive's frown.

"What is it?" Humphrey asked him.

"It's still early to speculate," Clive said.

"Something just popped into your head," Humphrey said. "We trust your instincts."

Clive gave another, reluctant frown.

"This residue," he said. "Does it look like old spider web to anyone else?"

"Could be," Humphrey said.

"This residual magic had lasted long enough that we're likely looking at something silver rank," Clive said. "If we combine that with blood magic and webs, then something does come to mind. Something I would rather be wrong about."

"Which is?" Neil asked.

"Have any of you heard of a blood weaver?"

Humphrey let out a low breath, while the others shook their heads.

"What's a blood weaver?" Jason asked.

"A spider monster, as you might surmise from the webs. It's silver rank, and more intelligent than most lower rank monsters. It's still more animal cunning than real intellect, but it is very much capable of planning and long-term thinking."

"That's not what it's famous for, though," Humphrey said. "After it feeds on a normal animal or monster, it can turn them into a deathless servant. Zombies, but there is something worse."

"Why is it always something worse?" Neil asked. "Why can't it ever be something better. Like cake."

"Oh, I could go a nice fluffy sponge cake," Jason said.

"Did you bring one?" Neil asked hopefully.

"Yes, but you can't have it until you rank up."

"Do try and keep on topic, boys," Belinda chided.

"Sorry," Neil and Jason said together.

"As I was saying," Humphrey said, "A blood weaver can turn regular people and animals into undead, shambling husks. Nothing too dangerous. A monster or essence user, though, it can turn into a vampire. A blood puppet to go out and collect more victims for the blood weaver to consume."

“So, you’re saying these cultists might be vampires, now?” Neil said.

“It’s only a possibility,” Clive said. “Given the environment, current magical density and the blood magic in the webs, though, it all fits.”

“Can we even fight the cultists if they’re vampires on top of everything else?” Neil asked.

“Actually, they would be easier to fight,” Clive said. “Individually, anyway. They have vampiric powers, but they can no longer access their essence abilities. They still have those abilities, because the soul is still in there, but they can’t use them without the body they no longer control. The body will still be effected by passive powers, but the controlled body can’t use any active abilities because it can’t control the soul, which is essentially trapped.”

“I know what that feels like,” Jason said darkly.

“What about the tracking stones?” Belinda asked. “If the cultists were turned into undead, would their stones still show them as alive?”

“I’m not sure,” Clive said. “It’s possible, since they do still have their souls. Or I could be wrong about all of this, there’s no blood weavers and the cultists are off playing cards somewhere.”

“Can you think of something worse it could be rather than a blood weaver?” Neil asked.

“Not off the top of my head,” Clive said.

“Then that’s probably what we’re dealing with,” Neil said. “It always turns out to be the worst possible option.”

“I can think of something worse,” Jason said and the team all looked at him. “They could have called it a vampider.”

The team continued on, the white residue becoming more and more evident. It quickly became clear that it was definitively remnant webs and they found a clearing where the trees were draped with webbing like curtains. There were old web sacs, the size of people and larger, that had been burst open from the inside. There was dried blood caked inside them, that still reeked.

“An old nest,” Clive said. “It’s definitely a blood weaver.”

Chapter 229

Brave Little Tailor

Clive stood up from where he had been crouching to examine one of the empty web sacks. The clearing turned out to only be the beginning, with empty web sacks hanging from trees or fallen to the ground, extending well back into the jungle. Clive had gone over them all, carefully examining the interior of each one.

“Unless there are some other people here that we weren’t aware of,” Clive said, “I would say that all of our cultists were snatched up by the blood weaver. The web sacks pack their victim in, nice and snug, and there are thirteen of these things that look like human moulds inside. Looks like she either ate the five that died completely and turned the rest, or the process has a failure rate.”

“So now we know for certain that we have to hunt this thing,” Sophie said. “How do we find it?”

“We don’t,” Clive said. “We’ve all seen what a silver rank monster can do. I doubt we could take the monster down if we caught it by itself, let alone with what I hope is only a small army of vampiric monsters. The weaver’s minions are something of a hive mind, controlled by the monster itself. Once we start fighting any of them, we’re fighting all of them. We can’t beat them all and the blood weaver on top.”

“We don’t know how long we have to stop whatever the cult is up to,” Belinda said. “As much as I like the backing off idea, don’t we have to go after it now, if it will take us to the cultists?”

“At this point, I don’t know how much the cultists have to offer us,” Clive said. “I doubt we’ll ever find them in a state where we can question them. Maybe if we kill the blood weaver they’ll regain some sense of self and be able to talk to us. More likely, we’ll have to try and find some clue from their corpses.”

“The cultists were a dangerous enough proposition when they were a bundle of cut-rate adventurers,” Neil said. “Now they have a silver-rank monster behind them? We’ve all seen what a silver-rank monster can do.”

“Exactly,” Humphrey said. “We can’t stop anything if we’re the blood puppets of some giant spider. Clive, where do we have to get to before we can take that thing down?”

“At the very least, Jason has to hit bronze rank,” Clive said. “The blood weaver is silver-rank tough, heals fast and can heal even faster by feeding on its own minions. Jason’s escalating damage is our only means of getting through that, even once we hit bronze.”

“Can’t he do that now?” Sophie asked. “He has an ability to get past higher-rank resistances, right?”

“That is a silver rank monster,” Clive said, “and not some lumbering giant he can outpace. At iron-rank he’s too slow, too weak and too frail. He’ll die before he can lock those afflictions in. And that is just considering the monster itself. The rest of us need to hold off the vampiric monster army long enough for Jason to get the job done. Given the magical density, we have to assume there will be a ready supply of bronze-rank monsters for that, and the cultists certainly will be. Maybe there’ll only be as many of them as there are web sacs around here, but from the state of this webbing, I think this is an older nest. I’m willing to bet that there’s more, and that’s a bet we’re gambling our lives with.”

“So you’re saying we need to run for the hills,” Jason said.

“We have the best training environment any of us will ever experience,” Clive said. “Every adventurer rises up during a monster surge and we have one that never ends, all to ourselves. We have to use it. I say we stop chasing the trail of the cultists and focus solely on getting as strong as we can, as quick as we can.”

“I completely agree,” Humphrey said. “I know that stopping the cult was hammered into us as the first priority once we got here, but now that path leads somewhere that we aren’t ready to go yet. I propose we walk right back out of here and start following the soul compass to abomination after abomination, taking on anything that gets in our path.”

“That isn’t also silver rank,” Neil amended.

“That isn’t also silver rank,” Humphrey agreed. “We stick to the training regimen, maximise our advancement. I’ll reach bronze before Jason, and Neil probably will as well. That’s our threshold to return. Sophie and Belinda will take longer than the rest of us, which is time we may not have. We don’t know that we have enough as is.”

Humphrey gave Belinda and Sophie a sympathetic look.

“It means that when we do go after the blood weaver, you will be the most vulnerable.”

“Speak for yourself,” Sophie said. “I’ll hold my own.”

“I’m pretty sure he meant me,” Belinda said. “I’ll stick with Clive and Neil. Boosting bronze-rankers will give me the chance to carry my own weight.”

“Wait,” Neil said. “Did we just make the sensible decision and not charge into the hopeless fight? Go team!”

After trying to portal past the jungle, the team had also tried portals to other locations and had confirmed that portal abilities wouldn’t work at all. This forced them to extract from

the thick ring of jungle by tracking back the way they had come. It quickly became evident that their presence had already been noticed.

“There are monsters approaching from multiple sides,” Shade warned from Jason’s shadow as his other two bodies scouted the jungle around them. “Judging from their physical appearance, disparate nature and cohesive movement, I believe them to be the blood weaver’s vampiric puppets.”

The team had developed their teamwork enough that they had no need to discuss tactics as they moved into a defensive formation. In the tight confines of the dense jungle, Humphrey and Sophie stood guard over Neil, Belinda and Clive as Jason vanished into the darkness.

Onslow emerged and Clive vaulted lightly onto his back. Even at the very start of bronze rank, Clive’s power and speed attributes gave him the strength of a huge powerlifter and the agility of a tiny gymnast. Belinda also called on her familiars, the silver lantern floating above her and the living illusion, a flickering replica of herself that shimmered into existence at her side.

“Why only move on us now?” Neil wondered.

“They were waiting for us to go deeper into the blood weaver’s territory,” Clive said. “Now, we’re trying to leave.”

“We didn’t sense them at all.”

“Many spider-type monsters can use networks of webbing to track their prey over a wide territory,” Humphrey said.

“Clive didn’t mention that before,” Neil said.

“Clive didn’t know,” Clive said testily. “Maybe if adventurers were less dismissive about sharing information with the Magic Society then there’d be fewer gaps in our knowledge.”

“Focus,” Humphrey said. “Jason should be starting right about...”

An alien shriek echoed through the jungle. They sensed the approaching auras before they saw the monsters. It was a disparate group, bronze and iron-ranks mixed together, but the same thread ran through each of the different auras. It felt like a blood-soaked wire leash, held in the grip of an unseen master.

“I definitely don’t want that in my aura,” Sophie said.

Monsters came pouring out of the jungle, varieties they had encountered before in the city, but changed. Eyes were bloodshot, skin was pale and taught over ropy muscle. There were snakes with barbs lining their backs, two-headed cats and colourful, spike-

spitting frogs. Almost half their number were the ape-like creatures Clive had fought, but even more feral. Their was a crazed hunger about them as they rushed at the team.

Humphrey and Sophie leapt into action. Sophie was a veritable blur, deflecting flying spikes and crippling ape monsters one after the other. It was almost like they were standing still as fists and feet, elbows, knees and palm strikes were rained down on joints, throats and eyes. Despite the onslaught, her face was calm, her movements as clinical and precise as they were fast. She fought with the clean efficiency of a machine, with no waste, no hesitation and no mercy.

A two-headed cat leapt high over the other monsters, sailing through the air towards her. She threw out a hand and a blast of wind sent it hurtling back into the jungle.

Ability: [Wind Wave] (Wind)

- Special Ability (movement).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 6 seconds.

- Current rank: Iron 6 (41%).

- Effect (iron): Produce a powerful blast of air that can push away enemies and physical projectiles. Can be used to launch into the air or move rapidly while already airborne.

A barbed snake jumped at her from a low angle and she snatched it out of the air, one hand on each of its upper and lower jaws. She reeled her hands apart and the snake's head with it, not even pausing as she continued to square off with the ape creatures.

One of the bronze-rank apes emerged, faster and stronger than the others. It barrelled through its fellows as it charged at Sophie. She activated an ability and time slowed to a stop around her.

Ability: [Eternal Moment] (Swift)

- Special Ability.
 - Cost: Extreme mana-per-second and stamina-per-second.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 5 (91%).

 - Effect (iron): Operate at a highly accelerated speed for one second of actual time, which is extended in subjective time.
-

Sophie's massive acceleration power only gave her a fleeting moment of near-frozen time to act. She waved her arms rapidly back and forth in front of her, each sweep producing an arced blade of wind that froze the moment it was separated from her body.

Ability: [Wind Blade] (Wind)

- Special attack.
 - Cost: Low mana.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 8 (88%).

 - Effect (iron): Create a cutting projectile of air.
-

The frozen time ended after the briefest interval, but Sophie's quick movements had primed a wall of wind blades. The instant the power ended, they were all unleashed on the monster charging at her, shredding the hulking ape into a bloody mess. Its charge became a stagger and she kicked it square in the chest, bloodying her boot. It fell over backwards and didn't move again.

Although she was incredibly quick on her feet, Sophie was holding her ground, not moving far as she fended off attackers. Humphrey, in the meantime, was the sword to her shield, charging forward to take the fight to the enemy. He conjured up his enormous sword, stylised in the form of a dragon's wing, that was immediately wreathed in flames.

Ability: [Dragon Wing Sword] (Wing)

- Conjuration (fire).
 - Cost: High mana.
 - Cooldown: 1 minute.

 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

 - Effect (iron): Conjures a huge sword in the shape of a dragon's wing. Special attacks with the movement subtype performed with this weapon inflict additional damage.

 - Effect (bronze): Normal and special attacks made with this weapon inflict fire damage and inflict the [Burning] condition.

 - [Burning] (affliction, damage-over-time, elemental): Inflicts ongoing fire damage.
-

The fire damage hardly seemed relevant as the sword brushed away enemies like fallen leaves.

Ability: [Unstoppable Force] (Might)

- Special attack.
- Cost: High mana, extreme stamina.
- Cooldown: 1 minute.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Melee attack with massive momentum, dealing large amounts of additional resonating-force and disruptive-force damage. Requires a heavy weapon.

- Effect (bronze): For each enemy struck the cooldown of this ability and the cost of the next use of this ability are reduced.

Three of the ape monsters and a two-headed cat all but exploded, their bodies not even slowing the horizontal sweep of the enormous sword. Humphrey paid no mind to self-protection as he arrived amidst the monsters like a lobbed grenade. He was far from without protection, however, starting with the dragon scale armour he conjured directly onto his body.

Ability: [Dragon Armour] (Dragon)

- Conjuration.
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Conjures a suit of dragon scale armour that confers strong physical protection and increases resistance to fire damage and effects.

- Effect (bronze): Armour confers increased resistance to non-physical damage and further increased resistance to fire damage and effects.

As Humphrey laid into the enemy, an illusory image fought beside him, harmless but distracting, making his attacks hard to anticipate. Just when the monsters thought they had the real Humphrey pegged, it would turn out to be his illusionary double. This was Belinda's familiar, Gemini, who could not only mimic allies, but switch-teleport with them. It used a mental connection with the mimicked ally to do so, like a more instinctual version of Jason's voice chat. It was an oddly intimate connection that allowed the ally to trigger the power.

The power of Belinda's familiar was quite similar to one of Humphrey's own.

Ability: [Attack of the Mirage Dragon]

- Transfigured from [Human] ability [Special Attack Affinity].
 - You are more likely to awaken special attacks than other ability types. Your special attacks have increased effect.
 - When you make special attacks, you can expend mana to create a short-lived, illusory double, replicating the attack. The illusion does not inflict damage or duplicate other effects from the attack but you can spend mana to switch-teleport with it, in the moment it is created. This is an illusion and teleport effect.
-

With every special attack, he not only created another, short-lived double, but Gemini did the same, leaving four of Humphrey running around for the monsters to try and pin down. Only Humphrey's allies were able to see the hazy blur that signalled which ones were illusions.

Dashing into the swarm of attackers had opened him up to their attacks and some inevitably went for Humphrey's true body. Many were intercepted by well-timed but short-lived bubble shields, courtesy of Neil.

Ability: [Absorbing Shield] (Shield)

- Special ability (recovery, retribution, drain).
 - Cost: High mana.
 - Cooldown: 20 seconds.
 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
 - Effect (iron): Create a short-lived shield that negates an incoming attack and generates mana-over-time with a strength that scales with the amount of damage negated. High-damage attacks of silver-rank or higher may not be entirely negated.
 - Effect (bronze): Drains health and mana from the attacker and bestows it upon the recipient of the shield.
-

Neil's absorbing shield simultaneously protected Humphrey and replenished his health and mana, allowing him to keep fighting at full strength. In addition to the drain effect, one of Neil's evolved racial gifts was incredibly valuable.

Ability: [Life Guard]

- Transfigured from [Elf] ability [Life Affinity].
- Effects used or received with a positive effect on life have greater effect.
- Using a shield-based essence ability on allies also bestows a heal-over-time effect.

If too many enemies were crowding on Humphrey, Neil would deploy his other bubble shield power.

Ability: [Burst Shield] (Shield)

- Special ability (recovery, retribution).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 20 seconds.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Create a short-lived shield that negates an incoming attack and explodes out, knocking-back nearby enemies and inflicting concussive damage. High-damage attacks of silver-rank or higher may not be entirely negated.

- Effect (bronze): Inflicts [Vibrant Echo] on anyone damaged by the blast.

- [Vibrant Echo] (affliction, damage-over-time, magic): Inflicts ongoing resonating-force damage.

While Humphrey and Sophie were both fighting multiple monsters, just the pair of them was not enough to cover every angle of approach. Monsters that tried to snake into the gaps were met by elemental attacks from Onslow and bolts of force from Belinda's lantern familiar, Shimmer. Belinda used her spurious sorcerer ability, granting her the power to use a wand from which she was blasting bolts of fire.

Clive's weapons were still stowed in his storage space as he sat atop Onslow, chanting out an extremely lengthy spell. When he was done, a huge red and gold eye appeared in the sky like a celestial body. It had the look of a fiery nebula, resembling an angry version of the eye in the torso of Jason's familiar, Gordon.

Ability: [Eye of Karma] (Karmic)

- Spell (zone, retribution).
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: 24 hours.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (04%).

- Effect (iron): Creates a wide-area zone. Within the zone, all damage inflicted by enemies or by effects generated by enemies cause disruptive-force damage to be inflicted on the enemy that was the source of the damage.

- Effect (bronze): Whenever damage triggers the zone effect, the damaged ally gains an instance of [Good Karma] and the enemy gains an instance of [Bad Karma].

- [Good Karma] (boon, holy, stacking): Damage from enemies with [Bad Karma] is reduced; this does not reduce the retributive damage suffered by enemies with [Bad Karma]. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

- [Bad Karma] (affliction, holy, retribution, stacking): A portion of damage you deal to enemies with [Good Karma] is also suffered by you as transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, to a maximum of 100% damage return.

The team was spending mana like water, knowing that mana recovery was one of their greatest strengths. Clive, Neil and Sophie all had powers that would replenish the mana of team mates within their overlapping auras, with Clive and Neil also having spells to replenish team mana.

After completing the zone spell, Clive pulled out his weapons and started blasting away. They were not as effective without the time to set up ritual enhancements, but were still potent weapons. He also started replenishing Onslow's powers.

The monsters attacking Humphrey and Sophie were now harming themselves as a result of the zone spell, but the sheer number of enemies threatened to overrun the team. From Clive's quick count, there were at least thirty, not counting however many Jason was off fighting in the jungle.

In spite of the team's efforts, however, the monsters still threatened to overwhelm them. Belinda started chanting her own long spell, and just as it seemed like the team would be overrun, the battlefield shifted.

Ability: [Unexpected Allies] (Charlatan)

- Spell (illusion, dimension, teleport).

- Cost: Extreme mana.
 - Cooldown: 1 hour.
 - Current rank: Iron 4 (16%).
 - Effect (iron): You and your allies take on illusory forms of nearby enemies, but your allies can still recognise one another. All allies and enemies in the area are randomly switch-teleported.
-

Just as the team's formation was about to be broken up by the press of opponents, Belinda's spell detonated it. The team was randomly teleported, as were the monsters. The teleport was short and relatively gentle, barely fazing those members of the team sensitive to it. The monsters were thrown into confusion by their sudden displacement and the seeming disappearance of their enemies. Unable to see through the illusory shrouds now covering the team, they milled about in confusion.

Belinda's power was the keystone of one of the team's tactics for engaging larger groups, which Jason dubbed the 'Brave Little Tailor' strategy. They made judicious attacks that prompted the monsters to attack one another, their discord briefly disrupting the thread of control in their aura. On top of the monsters harming one another, Clive's zone spell inflicted even more damage.

The controlling force quickly reasserted itself, but the sudden chaos had given the team time to gather together. Jason had notified them that all the surviving monsters had gathered close and he emerged from the shadows. It was just in time to vanish with the team as Neil used an ability.

Ability: [Reaper's Redoubt] (Shield)

- Special ability (dimension).
 - Cost: Extreme mana.
 - Cooldown: 6 hours.
 - Current rank: Iron 8 (64%).
 - Effect (iron): Take allies into a dimensional space briefly while flooding the area with death energy, dealing disruptive-force damage, necrotic damage and inflicting [Creeping Death] on everything in the area.
 - [Creeping Death] (damage-over-time, disease, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until the disease is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

When the team re-emerged from the dimensional space a few short moments later, the landscape had been transformed into a horrifying Tartarus. The death energy of Neil's

Reaper power had riven the jungle around them, leaving dead and rotting monsters amongst blackened and withered jungle. The undergrowth was black mulch underfoot, while the wood of the trees had rotted and split, sending them tumbling to the ground.

A few bronze-rank monsters had survived, but they were hurt and no longer had numbers on their side. The team made short work of them.

“Was anyone bitten in all of that?” Clive asked. “Vampire bites can have some unpleasant effects.”

“Their teeth only found my armour,” Humphrey said.

“I took a few claws and a spike or two, but no bites,” Sophie said.

Jason used his affliction absorbing power on Sophie, cleansing the poison of the spitter-frog spines.

“My blood powers were quite effective,” Jason said. “Turns out vampires are a bit susceptible to blood magic.”

“We can have the post-fight discussion later,” Humphrey said. “For now, we put as much distance between us and that spider as we can.”

Chapter 230

Terms of the Pact

“Those vampiric monsters were a bit disappointing,” Jason said. “They didn’t seem so much vampiric as hung over. A bit peaky, bloodshot eyes. They didn’t even summon any bats.”

“They’re spider vampires,” Neil said. “Why would they summon bats?”

“Well they didn’t summon any spiders, either.”

“I don’t think that’s how it works,” Belinda said. “Didn’t the spider kind of summon them?”

“That’s a good point,” Jason said.

The team had extricated themselves from the ring of dense jungle, returning to relatively intact streets and buildings of the overgrown city. They made sure they were well clear before putting up the cloud house and stopping to rest.

“Everyone take a good rest,” Humphrey said. “From here on out, our sole focus is on getting stronger.”

“It’s a shame there’s no movie essence,” Jason mused to himself. “A training montage power would be OP.”

“What nonsense are you talking now?” Sophie asked.

“I think I know this,” Clive. “There’s a fable from your world about learning to fight by cleaning an old man’s carriage, right?”

“There are different renditions of the story,” Jason said. “A lot of it comes down to your tolerance for power ballads. The message, though, is that everything we do is kung fu. That’s a term that, where I come from, has come to mean martial arts. What it really means, though, is accomplishment through diligent effort. Every action we take and every word we say is something that shapes us. The diligent person acts to improve and empower themselves.”

“Then why do you run around like a mad person, talking nonsense, instead of being all diligent?” Neil asked.

“Because everything is a weapon,” Jason said, “and there are few weapons as powerful as the way people look at you.”

Jason’s expression went through a subtle, yet powerful change. The cocky smile was suddenly sinister, his laughing eyes becoming predatory as they locked down on Neil. Neil shifted uncomfortably in his seat, unnerved as Jason watched him like a hawk eyeing a

mouse. Then Jason flashed a grin, eyes twinkling as he dissolved the tension as suddenly as he brought it about.

“Everything is a weapon,” Jason repeated, “if you know how to use it. There’s no better weapon you can hand an enemy than being predictable. Every one of you has, at some point, told someone to not bother trying to understand what I’m talking about. If someone doesn’t even try and understand me, that’s a weapon and shield they’ve just handed to me for nothing.”

“What about your allies?” Neil asked. “Don’t they need to rely on you?”

“They do need to, yes. Do you trust me, Humphrey?”

“Yes.”

“Clive?”

“Yeah.”

“Sophie?”

“Yes.”

Jason smiled at Neil.

“What about you, Neil? Do you trust me to stand at your back? That I’ll be there when you need me to be?”

“I guess I do,” Neil admitted.

“You grew up in a world of magical power,” Jason said, turning his gaze from Neil to address the whole team. “Direct, objective, honest power. I come from a political world, where power is nebulous and the wars are as much about ideology as territory. We grow up watching leaders who need to sway the populace in order to hold power, even as the populace can share information in ways that would be as amazing to you as magic was to me.”

Jason nodded at Humphrey.

“Humphrey’s mother encouraged our friendship because she recognised that I had a more political mind than is normally to be found in Greenstone. I’m sure it’s different in more cosmopolitan cities, but the politics here are amateurish and crude. Dangerous, yes, because power always is, but not especially complicated. She wanted Humphrey to get to know me so that he would see the next guy like me coming.”

Jason conjured his dagger into his hand.

“This,” he said, “is the weakest weapon there is. A blade can cut down a person but words can bring down a kingdom. Adultery can end a dynasty, greed can start a war and compassion can end one. People will die for strangers out of faith and kill their neighbours out of fear.”

He casually tossed aside the dagger and it vanished.

“Everything is a weapon,” he concluded. “The trick is learning to wield them without doing yourself an injury.”

The room fell quiet in the wake of Jason’s impromptu speech, until Sophie broke the silence.

“Gods damn, you like to hear yourself talk.”

The team fell into a regimented schedule of physical training, skill training, mental training and monster hunting. Days became weeks and Humphrey joined Clive at bronze rank, his square-jawed handsomeness becoming even more pronounced.

Clive had already reached bronze rank and was relegated to lowest priority during training. This afforded him the time to study the changes to the astral space’s ambient magic. He was trying to learn what was causing the changes and how it was preventing them from using portals or escaping. He didn’t find the answers he was looking for, but he did make other discoveries, which he laid out one evening in the cloud house.

“The magical density is increasing,” he announced to the team. “I’m not exactly sure why, but something seems to be forcing a highly dense magic into this astral space.”

“What does that mean for us?” Humphrey asked.

“A few things,” Clive said. “One, we aren’t getting out of here until we find whatever is causing this and stop it. Two, we need to keep up this training because the monsters are going to be getting stronger. We’ll see less iron-ranks over time and running into a silver will become more and more of an inevitability. Three, the rate at which this astral space will break down is on an increasingly steep curve. We’re still talking a matter of years, for the moment, but as the magical density goes up, the time frame will come down.”

“Well that’s only completely terrifying,” Neil said.

“What do you recommend we do?” Humphrey asked.

“We already have the right plan,” Clive said. “Improving our strength is more important than ever, and the cultists are still our best chance at getting a handle on what’s happening. We need to deal with that blood weaver and hopefully figure out what they were up to.”

“Alright,” Humphrey said. “Jason, Sophie and Belinda; we’ll be pushing all the focus onto you. Once Jason reaches bronze we’ll move immediately on the blood weaver. Sophie and Belinda, we’ll get you to bronze as quickly as we can. We can’t have you still at iron rank if we’re going to be meeting silver rank monsters with any regularity.”

Belinda's abilities were progressing at a steady, but not exceptional pace. She had reached the point where she could comfortably fight small groups of iron-rank monsters alone, using the abilities that gave her temporary skills. They found that she actually advanced more quickly from group fights, where more of her powers could be used effectively.

Belinda's jack-of-all-trades power set lacked the punch to jump ranks and fight a bronze-rank monster alone. Sophie had no such problems, relishing both the fights and the resulting rapid advancement of her abilities. The monster-infested city was eager to oblige as they saw as many fights in a day as an active adventurer in Greenstone would in a week.

Ranking up the latter stages of an ability was a harder, slower progress, but iron-rank monsters were getting harder to come by, being replaced with more bronze-ranker who offered enough challenge to keep their advancement proceeding at their original pace. The monsters started appearing in the kind of numbers the team had originally encountered the iron-rank ones in and the team was more and more required to fight as a whole instead of peeling off members to maximise the challenge.

Jason had expected his familiar ability for Shade to be the hardest to rank up. Colin and Gordon were both able to engage directly in combat, where as Shade's power to attack amounted to little more than some mana draining. To Jason's surprise, Shade kept pace with Gordon, rapidly passing through the lower levels of advancement.

While not an attacker, Shade's utility as a shadow-jump target saw Jason heavily rely on him in combat. In hindsight, Jason realised that of course a utility-type familiar would advance from utility tasks. To help that along, he practised sharing the senses of one of Shade's remote bodies. It would be useful in allowing him to directly observe from safety whatever his familiar was scouting out. He could even speak through Shade, although his voice chat was still a superior communication method.

The cult hidden at the Vane Estate had a visitor in the form of Anisa Lasalle. Timos led her through the grounds, now dead and dry as the desert reclaimed them. The hedge maze was now more of a dry twig maze and the cult had cut a more direct path to the centre, through which Timos led the priestess. She had arrived alone, while Timos had a pair of iron-rank lackeys on hand.

"It's been a while, Priestess," Timos said, a smile playing on his lips. "How was your... sabbatical?"

Walking beside him, Anisa Lasalle glanced at Timos with disdain. The elven priestess was wearing extremely fitted adventuring gear, it's monochromatic white barely more pale than her skin. Her platinum hair was bound back in a simple and practical ponytail.

"I detest you and your kind," she said. "Frankly, I would rather have stayed in hiding than deal with you. Each indignity I have suffered over the past months can be laid solely at the feet of your failures."

"Your memory is poor, Priestess," Timos said. "I think you'll find that the impatience of your god has..."

Timos was cut off as Anisa's gloved hand clutched his throat, her thumb pressing savagely into his windpipe. His two lackeys moved to assist but a trio of searing orbs of light appeared to hover threateningly in front of them.

"You will not disparage my god," Anisa told Timos calmly. "In fact, it would be best for all involved if you never profaned his name with your tainted lips. Am I making myself clear?"

Timos nodded, choking all the more at the action, but she released him and he fell to his knees, coughing and spluttering. His eyes shot venom up at her as he rubbed his throat, but he nodded again.

"I understand," he said.

"See that you do. Now stand up; I'm not going to stand idle, waiting for you to recover from the latest in a long series of errors."

Timos's people looked ready to act, but he stilled them with a head shake. The gesture was not unnoticed by Anisa, but she did not deign to comment. He staggered to his feet and they continued on, reaching what had once been the well at the centre of the maze.

No one had checked on the estate since the Rejector's party had passed through and the cult had decided excavating the well and the crawl tunnel at the bottom was an acceptable risk. One of the cultists with earth-shaping powers had created a set of stone stairs into what was originally a natural cavern. The wooden walkway once traversed by Jason had been removed and the walls and floor smoothed out. Stone walls had been put up to form a subterranean complex. They had no woodworker, so despite ample materials above, curtains were hanging in place of doors. Glow stones affixed to the walls lit the rooms and hallways.

Timos led the priestess through the complex, but she stopped halfway. Her eyes were boring into one of the cultists, a grizzled man moving a crate of supplies.

"You," she said to the man. "I know you."

“Yes, Miss. I’m Dougall. I let you out of the cage, when the blood cult had you captured.”

“A rat jumping ship,” she said. “You caught wind of Remore putting paid to your little branch of the Red Table and realised you would need a new master. The blood cult deals with failure in very carnivorous ways, after all. Clearly you knew much more of Landemere Vane’s loyalties than anyone in the household realised. The opportunistic loyalty of a cultist is revealed as base and self-serving in the face of adversity. Where does your faith lie?”

“I…”

“I don’t want you to speak. Or perhaps you should. I remember that you were looking for a taste of elf flesh. Are you still looking to feast on my bones, cultist?”

“I would never, Miss…”

“Pathetic. You aren’t worth the blood stain to kill.”

She swept off, Timos hurrying to keep showing the way. They went all the way to the metal door leading into Landemere Vane’s old ritual room. Everything had been stripped away to the bare stone, the only features being an archway in the centre of the room, the complex ritual circle around it and the mana lamps that artificially heightened the ambient magic, allowing the circle to function. The cult was charging a large number of lamps around the estate to keep the ritual circle operational.

The archway looked like it had been made from salvaged building materials, an irregular construction of cheap-looking, mismatched bricks, held in place with what looked like ordinary mortar.

The silver rank leader of the cultists, Zato, was standing with his back to the door, looking at an inert archway. He turned at their entry, eyes lingering on the marks on Timos’ neck but saying nothing.

“How long?” Anisa demanded, without preamble.

“Weeks,” Zato said. “Two and a half months, at the outside.”

“Two and a half months!” Anisa raged. “You have already had more than enough time!”

“And your church has nowhere near enough patience!” Zato yelled back. “Every problem you blame us for goes back to your church refusing to wait, the way you were counselled. Your insistence on acting so early cost us everything and gained us nothing. It’s like you somehow think you worship the god of time, able to make things happen whenever you want. If your church had been willing to wait, then the cult’s identity and

your trafficking with us would both remain secret. We are still years away from the true beginning, but you had to be impatient children.”

Anisa fumed, but she was bronze to his silver rank and had her orders.

“I am here to inform you that your request is unacceptable,” she said, biting off every word. “We will not be acceding to it.”

“You go and tell your archbishop that not only will his people be joining us in the astral space, but so will he. The laxity of your church cost us every silver-ranker we had in this region. I’m the only exception and I had barely ranked up when your people led the Remores to the island. I hadn’t even been fully inducted into the leadership.”

“The blame for the island does not fall on us.”

“Of course it doesn’t,” Zato sneered. “Every success is your people and every failure is mine. I might as well argue with a child.”

“We lost a gold-ranker in the island attack, so do not come complaining to me,” Anisa said.

“I did not call you here to hear complaints,” Zato said, regaining his composure “I am invoking the terms of the pact. Nicolas Hendren will be leading his people to join us when the tunnel finishes forming and the portal opens. I expect all of you here in two months.”

Anisa gave him a smile that somehow perfectly encapsulated hatred, but said nothing. She turned on the spot and swept out of the room like an angry wind.

Chapter 231

Trading Safety Today For Death Tomorrow

The team had been aware going in that there were locations within the city that were more than just empty ruins. A number of trial-goers had reported such locations to the Magic Society and Emir's people, who had undertaken a large-scale debrief of the iron rankers who survived the trials. In addition to monsters unlike those found elsewhere in the city, such locations held unusually valuable treasure.

Clive had been one of those who encountered such a place during the trials, where he obtained the legendary set items both he and Neil were wielding. For him it was a staff and wand set that had become a crucial part of his combat potential. For Neil, it was a fist-sized orb that shone with a blue light when held, and a gold circlet with a blue gem set into the forehead. The abilities combined to powerfully enhance his shielding powers, which the team appreciated.

Given the formidable power of the abilities on those items, the team eagerly explored any location that was outside the ordinary. In addition to being as likely as any other place to have monsters to confront, there was always the chance of treasure. With the battles to come, any advantage was a much-needed blessing.

Most such places were either subterranean complexes or atop unusually tall buildings, much as Clive's had been. The first of these locations the team encountered for themselves was a sprawling complex of underground forges, foundries and furnaces. In addition to having dangerous fire and iron elementals, it was infested with bizarre undead, with metal fused into their bodies like magical cyborgs.

Jason had found it a frustrating place to fight, with most of the enemies highly resistant, if not outright immune to his abilities. He made good use of the sword Gary had given him, but it was a marked step-down in his capabilities.

"It's good for you," Sophie had told him.

"If you only train for when things go right, you die the moment they go wrong," Humphrey said.

"Yeah," Jason acknowledged unhappily. "Rufus used to tell me almost the exact same thing."

That place had eventually yielded some impressive treasures, although not so useful as those Clive had found. There was a pair of gloves that enhanced fire and iron-based abilities, and an anvil that enhanced the crafting of weapons. They took them with the intention of delivering them to Gary.

The complex had also delivered a solid haul of essences and awakening stones, almost all fire and iron. They were both common, but very popular, meaning they would fetch a good price once they returned to civilisation. They were a welcome addition to the piles of spirit coins and quintessence gems piling up in their storage spaces, courtesy of Jason and Neil's looting powers.

The next similar location they came across was likewise underground. They were uncertain to its nature, at first, as it was very plain, but they could tell it was unusual from how intact it was. Most subterranean spaces in the city were thick with mould and root systems breaking in through the walls and ceiling. This complex was all square tunnels and empty rooms, the brickwork uniform and unblemished.

"There doesn't seem to be anything here," Belinda said as they looked over another empty room. "No loot, no monsters nesting in here. Not even the dilapidated furniture and such you get in most of the ruins.

"All these empty rooms remind of the place we found in the delta under the swamp," Humphrey said.

"That's worth remembering," Clive said. "That place seemed empty until we had a face full of marsh hydra."

"A good lesson," Humphrey agreed. "This place may well be empty because the one thing in here has scared off the rest."

"Are we ready to face a silver-rank monster?" Neil asked. "We haven't had to do it yet, but the monsters have been getting stronger and stronger. We hardly see any iron-ranks anymore."

"If we caught one in isolation, then maybe," Humphrey said. "The problem is that we still have too many iron-rankers."

"I'm so close to bronze I can taste it," Neil said.

They continued through the complex, finally discovering what it was.

"A prison," Jason said as he surveyed the latest room they had entered. "That's great. Nothing bad ever happened in a creepy, abandoned, subterranean prison. I'm so glad monsters turned out to be real."

They were in a large, long cell block, with a mezzanine level running along each side. The cells, running the length of the room on both levels were barred, giving the team a clear look inside. None of the cells had occupants, being as empty as every other room they had come across. Moving through the large cell block, they found stairs that led down into another, and then a third. It was there that they finally found something.

"Signs of combat," Clive said. "This really does remind me of that place we found."

“This is fresher,” Humphrey said, examining a scorch mark on the wall. “Most likely, someone found this place during the trials.”

“There’s something at the far end of the room,” Jason said. His ability to see through darkness extended beyond where the light of the team’s glow stones grew dim.

The team moved forward carefully, finding a handful of corpses scattered about where they had fallen. A violent demise and months in the muggy, underground chamber had not left them in a pleasant state, but as Jason’s powers left enemies in much the same condition, they were used to it. Rather than dwell on the state of the bodies, they considered what might have left them that way.

“No trace of whatever killed them,” Jason said. “It seems the fight was either one-sided, or whoever killed them took their own fallen when they left.”

“Hard to determine what killed them from the bodies,” Neil said. “They’re too far gone to make out much. I am seeing some broken bones, so something physically powerful maybe.”

“We didn’t fight anything on the way in here,” Sophie said, already eyeing the room around them. “There weren’t any signs of combat before this, and I think they would have left some. I’m seeing scorch marks, chunks torn out of the stone floor. I think that whatever killed them didn’t show up until they reached this point.”

None of the team had let up their guard, but for the moment, nothing was making an attack.

“It could have been other adventurers,” Jason said. “We know that at least some of us were killing each other.”

“All we can do is be cautious moving forward,” Humphrey said. “That, and collect these poor souls for return to their families.”

They went about the grisly task of retrieving Adventure Society badges, for identification and to return to the families. There had been discussion of retrieving remains before they came in, but storage space was at a premium for coffins and any remains were likely to be a mess. A number of families made quiet approaches to try and make specific arrangements for their lost people, but Humphrey flatly refused. He insisted on keeping things even handed and restricting recovery to Adventure Society badges.

“What about their equipment?” Belinda asked. “It feels ghoulish to loot the dead.”

“We’ll return their gear to the families, along with the remains,” Humphrey said. “Once they’re identified.”

At the end of the cell block. Not far past the bodies, was a pair of large doors. They were metal, but unlike the bars of the cells, were unblemished by time and moisture. They

were plain and heavy, with a large keyhole on each. There were traces of a ritual circle drawn around each keyhole.

“Maybe that’s what brought out whatever killed them,” Jason said. “Trying to break-in triggered some kind of defences, maybe?”

“The obvious solution, then, would be to not break-in,” Neil said. “I mean, treasure is nice, but we just picked up a dead adventuring team. Do we really want to be the next one?”

“He’s not wrong,” Jason said. “We have a responsibility, here. We may be the only ones who can stop the cult from tearing this astral space off the side of the world. Or whatever it is they’re going to do with those giant golems. We can’t go getting ourselves killed over some loot.”

“On the other hand,” Humphrey said, “we need to push ourselves to the limit, and beyond. We don’t know what kind of challenges we’ll have to face in stopping the cult, but I don’t think the cultists being captured by the blood weaver is the end of it. I’m certain there are greater challenges ahead before we can put paid to the cult’s intentions.”

“So, you’re saying we should face whatever killed these people as a training exercise?” Jason asked.

“Since when are you the voice of moderation?” Clive asked.

“I’m not saying we shouldn’t do it,” Jason said. “I just think that the idea of not doing it is worth exploring. I’ve been too reckless, too often. I’ve survived too many times on luck which, sooner or later, is going to run out. This isn’t a monster we have some idea about, before we go in. We backed off because we weren’t ready for the blood weaver. What if this is worse?”

“We need to get you and Neil over the threshold for bronze,” Humphrey said.

“I’m not sure this will do it,” Jason said. “If there is a still-active defence system here, then it has to be something that didn’t die out in all the years this place has been dormant. My guess would be some kind of construct guardian, or maybe some undead. I won’t get to workout my powers like that.”

“Your familiars are the last abilities you have to advance,” Humphrey said. “If your other abilities are less useful, your familiars become more important.”

“I say we go for it,” Sophie said. “Humphrey’s right that we need to have the experience of having something dropped on us that we aren’t ready for. Better we experience that now, so we have the experience before the cultists do it to us.”

“What do you think, Clive?” Humphrey asked.

Clive rubbed his chin, thoughtfully.

“The biggest danger is to our iron-rankers,” he said. “I think we leave the decision to them.”

“That’s fair,” Humphrey said. “So, what’s it going to be?”

“I’m still up for it.”

“If Sophie’s in, I’m in,” Belinda said.

“I’m going to say no,” Jason said. “If Neil wants to make it three to one, I’m fine with that, but if he wants to play it safe, I’ll back him.”

Everyone turned to Neil.

“Great,” Neil said. “Now it’s my fault if everybody dies.”

“You’re saying go for it?” Jason asked.

“Jason, you weren’t there during the expedition,” Neil said. “You haven’t fought these people. You haven’t seen the monstrosities they turned themselves into. The endless sea of constructs at their command. I don’t know what they’re going to bring to bear against us, but we can’t be ready enough. Not taking every chance we have to get stronger is trading safety today for death tomorrow.”

“And here was I thinking that you were the sensible one,” Jason said. “Alright, then. Of course, if we’re wrong about the defence mechanisms, this whole conversation was pointless.”

The decision made, Clive turned his attention to the large doors.

“They messed up their unlocking ritual,” Clive said. “Even at a glance I can see how amateurish it was. No wonder they set off any defences.”

“Then do what they did,” Jason said. “You can worry about getting it right afterwards.”

“That’s not very professional,” Clive complained.

“Being professional isn’t the objective, right now,” Jason said.

“If the goal isn’t to get it right, then you might as well do it,” Clive said.

“That’s hurtful,” Jason said. “But fair enough. Everyone else get ready.”

While the team gathered in preparation for a fight, Jason examined the doors and the remnant lines of a ritual circle drawn onto each in chalk.

“You weren’t kidding, Clive,” Jason said. “Even I can tell this is a dog’s breakfast. It looks like someone who barely knew what they were doing just copied this ritual out of a book.”

“Probably someone who used a ritual magic skill book and never took the time to learn any theory,” Clive said.

“Was that aimed at me?” Jason asked. “I’ve been hitting the books pretty hard, as you well know.”

“Can you please just get on with it?” Humphrey asked.

“Sorry,” Jason said.

Jason took out a stick of chalk to redraw in the faded lines. He recognised the basic unlocking ritual, which was indeed something that had been in the ritual magic skill book he had used himself. That fortunately meant that he had the ritual incantation memorised, which was somewhat tricky. The chant was one of those that were series a series of sounds rather than words, in and of themselves, meaningless. They simply existed to set up a resonance and begin channelling magic through the ritualist and into the ritual diagram.

Jason carried out the ritual, but the locks in the middle of the ritual circles glowed red hot. Much of the redrawn circles burst off the doors in a puff of chalk dust. Jason turned and joined the others, drawing his sword in readiness for whatever appeared to meet them. They did not have to wait long.

Individual bricks in the walls and floor sank drew back into recesses with a grinding of stone. Moments later, small stone and metal spiders came swarming out of the holes all over the room. They immediately started scuttling toward the group, swarming over the walls and across the ceiling.

The construct creatures had minimal auras, but they were clearly iron-rank.

“Belinda, Neil.” Humphrey said.

“Yeah,” Belinda said.

“Got it,” Neil followed. “On your call, Belinda.”

The tiny constructs had painted the walls and ceiling as they moved on the team. As the front runners edged closer and closer, some of the team started throwing Belinda glances.

“Uh, Belinda?” Neil asked.

“Wait,” she said calmly.

Construct spiders started dropping off the ceiling and the upper parts of the walls as they drew excruciatingly close to the team. Clive raised his staff to fire off a blast and Belinda waved him down with a gesture.

“Not yet,” she said.

“Are you kidding?” Clive asked.

“I have to catch a lot of them,” Belinda said. “Alright, Neil. Now.”

Neil chanted out a quick spell.

“Let your power fulminate.”

Ability: [Bolster] (Growth)

- Spell (boon).
- Cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): The next essence ability used by the target ally has increased effect. This can affect parameters including damage, range and number of targets, depending on the affected ability. Cannot be used on self.

- Effect (bronze): Mana and stamina costs of the affected ability are reduced. In the case of ongoing mana and stamina costs, only costs initiated with the ability are affected. Costs invoked subsequent to the ability being activated are unaffected.

As soon as she felt the power of Neil's spell affecting her, Belinda threw out her hand and a crystal rod rose up from the floor.

Ability: [Force Tether] (Trap)

- Conjunction.
- Cost: Low mana-per-second.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 7 (09%).

- Effect (iron): Conjures a crystal rod, from which a tether of shimmering force connects to all nearby enemies within a moderate range. Tethered enemies are dragged toward the rod, which is protected by a force field that inflicts moderate resonating force-damage to anyone in contact with it. If the force-field is ruptured, it explodes in a wave of resonating-force damage. If the rod is destroyed or removed from its location then it explodes in a wave of disruptive-force damage. Dimensional displacement, such as teleportation, severs the tether. Untethered enemies who enter within range of the rod become tethered. Only one force tether rod may exist at a time.

Shimmering tethers of force shot out to every spider in range, which was almost all of them given how close Belinda had allowed the mass to encroach on the team. There were so many it seemed less like a series of tethers and more like a wall. All the spiders were plucked from the walls, ceiling or where they had fallen to the floor and dragged toward the crystal rod. The constructs were so light and weak that they all were yanked right up to the tip of the rod, piling into a ball at the end of the shaft like the head of a dandelion. The innermost spiders were constantly damaged as they were dragged against the force-field surrounding the crystal rod.

Not every one of the spiders had fallen within the range of the bolstered tether, but it was the significant majority. Belinda followed up with another power.

Ability: [Pit of the Reaper] (Trap)

- Conjunction (dimension).
 - Cost: High mana.
 - Cooldown: 2 minutes.

 - Current rank: Iron 6 (14%).

 - Effect (iron): Conjures a dimensional space pit on any horizontal surface. The surface does not need to be solid or supportive. Anyone inside the pit suffers ongoing necrotic damage. If this spell is cast again while a pit already exists, the existing pit vanishes, depositing anyone inside upon the surface on which the pit was conjured.
-

The rod fell into the pit that opened up underneath them, dragging the spiders down. Having moved from its original location, it detonated. The force field around the crystal rod blew up first, then the rod itself shortly after, both blasting the spiders with force and crushing them against the sides of the dimensional pit. Some were launched back up and out of the pit, although they landed inert and unmoving.

The team moved to clean up the spider constructs that had escaped the tether-pit combination, clearing out the rest with wand, staff, sword and, in Sophie's case, boot. It wasn't long before everything was done. The pit vanished, and the destroyed construct remnants disgorged up from the vanishing pit and into a pile.

"Does anyone else feel like that was a bit anticlimactic, after all that talk?" Neil asked, and Jason immediately let out a groan.

"Why in the world would you go and say something like that?" Jason asked.

"What?" Neil asked in turn. Suddenly there was a grinding sound as large sections of the floor started to descend, leaving large holes.

"That's what," Jason said.

"I think they would have opened, whether I said anything or not," Neil said.

"Well, now we'll never know."

Chapter 232

Stalwart

The spider constructs had appeared from holes that had opened in the walls and ceiling. This time, it was the floor that opened up, six large, evenly-spaced but much larger holes, appearing in a straight line down the length of the cell block. The team didn't wait for whatever was within to emerge, springing straight into action.

"I'll take the first, you the second," Clive said to Belinda and they both quickly chanted out their rune trap spell.

"Emplace the mark of power."

Runes appeared on the floor, in front of the first and second holes. They glowed brightly for a brief moment before vanishing. As they cast their spells, Humphrey vaulted into the air, a pair of dragon wings appearing on his back and pushing him upwards.

Ability: [Dragon Wings] (Wing)

- **Conjuration (movement).**
- **Cost: High mana-per-second.**
- **Cooldown: None.**

- **Current rank: Bronze 0 (01%).**

- **Effect (iron): Manifest wings that are powerful but lack agility.**

- **Effect (bronze): The strength and resilience of the wings is increased, allowing them to be used for crude attacks to the sides and rear. The wings have strong damage resistance and very strong fire resistance. Ongoing mana cost is reduced from very high to high.**

Humphrey alighted on the upper mezzanine level, letting the mana-hungry wings vanish again. Sophie sauntered forward, ready to meet whatever emerged, while Jason vanished into the shadows.

Neil had been hastily pouring salt from a small sack to make a circle. He knelt briefly and touched a finger to the circle when it was done. The salt crystals started sparkling like flecks of diamond in the sun before a dervish of crystal appeared above the circle, swiftly cohering into the shape of Neil's summon.

Ability: [Chrysalis Golem] (Growth)

- **Summoning.**
 - **Cost: Very high mana.**
 - **Cooldown: 6 hours.**

 - **Current rank: Iron 9 (97%).**

 - **Effect (iron): Summons a chrysalis golem.**
-

The golem was a large, humanoid edifice of translucent crystal, half as tall again as its summoner. Neil gestured it forward, where it positioned itself between the team's support contingent and the holes from which the enemy was about to emerge.

From each hole, a single figure rose up from below. Like Neil's golem, they were constructs, ascending on platforms that sealed the holes from which they came. They also shared the golem's intimidating size, but not its humanoid appearance. These new constructs had a body that was a vertical cylinder of plain, dark stone. From the base, four legs held it up, obviously built for stability over speed.

Equidistant at cardinal points around the middle of the cylinder were long, inhuman arms. Each arm was segmented with a pair of elbows that allowed them to move in uncanny gestures. The arms ended in blunted, four-fingered claws. Atop each cylinder, in place of a head, was a stone bowl. As the constructs rose up, spheres of magical force manifested into each bowl, shimmering like a soap bubble, and the constructs began to move.

Like all constructs, they didn't have a soul and their auras were the meagre product of the magic animating them. It was enough to let the team know their opponents were somewhere in the mid-range of bronze-rank power.

The two sides were moving on each other before the platforms bringing the constructs up had even completed their task. Sophie was the quickest, ignoring the first two constructs to go after the third, rapidly hammering attacks into the joints of its arms. The movement of the arms was quick and tricky, but Sophie's reflexes were up to the task. As it continued to rise up, she went after the leg joints as well. The effectiveness of her attacks was limited, but the resonating-force damage of her special ability did succeed in chipping away at the hard stone of the leg.

Ability: [Immortal Fist] (Mystic)

- Special ability.
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 8 (21%).

- Effect (iron): Unarmed attacks deal additional resonating-force damage, which is highly effective against physical defences. Suffer no damage from making unarmed strikes against objects and negate all damage from actively intercepted attacks. Not all damage from very powerful or higher-ranked attacks will be negated.

The two constructs she had passed stepped over the edge of their holes before the platforms they rode reached the level of the floor to seal them. They moved forward towards the main group, only to walk over the now-invisible runes, which detonated as they did so. The explosion was not enough to knock the heavy creatures over but they were successful in causing enough damage to have cracks appear in their legs. This was most true of the closest construct, which had walked over Clive's trap. It suffered the full effect of the bronze-rank power, then the secondary explosion on afterward.

Ability: [Rune Trap] (Rune)

- Spell.
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 1 minute.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (03%).

- Effect (iron): Create an explosive rune that will disappear after a short period. The rune can be set to trigger by proximity, caster trigger, or both.

- Effect (bronze): Enemies affected by the rune trap will be the source of a secondary explosion after a brief period.

The second construct was not much more than briefly staggered by Belinda's trap, but Humphrey made the most of the immobile target. He plummeted down like a meteor, stacking up powers into a single, potent attack. He started by invoking one of his racial gifts.

Ability: [Dragon Blood]

- Transfigured from [Human] ability [Essence Gift].
 - [Power] and [Spirit] attributes are enhanced for moderate mana-per-second.
-

His dragon wings appeared once again as he plunged from above, driving him forcefully towards his target below.

Ability: [Dive Bomb] (Wing)

- Special attack (movement, combination).
 - Cost: High stamina.
 - Cooldown: 20 seconds.
 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (02%).
 - Effect (iron): Accelerate down to attack a target from above; can be combined with normal or special melee attacks. Physical damage from these attacks is increased. No falling damage is suffered when using this ability, even if the attack misses.
 - Effect (bronze): A resonating-force shockwave is produced from the impact point.
-

Another of Humphrey's racial gifts further enhanced the power of his attack.

Ability: [Wing Raider]

- Transfigured from [Human] ability [Essence Gift].
 - Speed, momentum and damage of movement-type special attacks is increased. Heavy conjured weapons and armour do not increase stamina consumption, regardless of weight, and do not impede movement abilities. Light conjured weapons have increased weight and momentum without being heavier to wield, counting as heavy weapons for the purposes of special attack requirements.
-

Dive bomb would do damage alone, but as it was a combination special attack, Humphrey added another power that would be especially effective against the construct.

Ability: [Shield Breaker] (Might)

- Special attack.
- Cost: Low mana, moderate stamina.
- Cooldown: 10 seconds.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (04%).

- Effect (iron): Inflicts additional resonating-force damage, highly effective against physical defences. Requires a heavy weapon.

- Effect (bronze): Damage to rigid material is significantly increased.

As Humphrey plunged through the air, the sphere that had formed in the monster's strange bowl head floated up to intercept him. It grew as it moved into his path, large enough to engulf his whole body. Humphrey passed through the sphere, which popped like the soap bubble it resembled. It had not so much as slowed him down.

-
- You have been trapped in [Sphere of Incarceration].
 - [Sphere of Incarceration] has triggered ability [Unstoppable].
 - [Sphere of Incarceration] has been destroyed.

In a team full of unconventional members, it was easy to overlook Humphrey and his powers that were as straightforward as Humphrey himself. What he brought to the team was something that they otherwise lacked: simple, reliable power. When Humphrey Geller wanted to attack you, you were getting attacked.

Ability: [Unstoppable]

- Transfigured from [Human] ability [Essence Gift].

- Movement abilities cannot be negated or impaired. Resonating-force damage and disruptive-force damage are imparted to any obstructing object, increased for each movement ability and special attack in effect. This is a movement effect.

Humphrey came down on the construct like the United States military on an oil-rich nation. His assault from above was domineering, overwhelming and inflicted a level of widespread damage that went way beyond his expectations.

The initial strike smashed right through the stone bowl and burying itself deep in the cylindrical body. The construct was riddled with cracks and half destroyed, a job finished by

the dive bomb attack's secondary shock wave. It freed Humphrey's sword as the construct was blasted into shrapnel

As Humphrey destroyed the second construct Sophie continued to tie up the third. It tried to catch her with its own sphere, but her speed and mobility powers allowed her to nimbly avoid it, even as her attacks continued, unabated. The closest she came to being caught was when she looked back as fragments of the construct behind her explosively showered her with shrapnel.

One of her construct's legs gave out beneath her unrelenting attacks, but it continued to fight back with the lengthy, multi-jointed arms that tried to slam her into the floor. Some attacks she blocked, others she neatly side-stepped, all the while continuing her own assault. She was able to more than hold her own against her bronze-rank enemy, but it remained a dangerous opponent. She was all too aware that getting caught up fighting just one meant she was not protecting the team from the others.

Sophie and Humphrey had left one construct between them and the bulk of the team, which was intercepted by Neil's summon. Although the two constructs were of a similar size, the bronze-rank enemy quickly began to overpower the summon. It started by using two of its four clawed hands to grab the chrysalis golem's arms, holding them out of the way as a third claw hammered away on the golem's crystalline body. With each blow, a new rune appeared on the myriad facets of the chrysalis golem, even as it struggled, ineffectually.

While this was going on, Neil watched in silence, primed to throw out any necessary shields and healing for his teammates. Belinda was likewise actively prepared to support the team, as needed. Clive in contrast was drawing a ritual circle at the end of his staff, lines of golden light appearing at a wave of his finger.

Ability: [Enact Ritual] (Rune)

- Special ability.
 - Cost: varies.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (09%).

 - Effect (iron): Manifest lines of magic to draw out ritual diagrams. Materials required for a ritual may be used directly from a dimensional storage space instead of being placed within the diagram.

 - Effect (bronze): Create simple ritual diagrams to alter the parameters of magical items.
-

Quickly completed, the ritual circle floated in the air, affixed by an invisible force to the end of his staff.

-
- You have altered the effect of [Spell Lance of the Magister]. Damage has been altered from disruptive-force to resonating-force.
-

The disruptive-force of his staff attacks were highly-effective against magic and adequate for most enemies, but would suffer against the hard and tough bodies of the constructs. The time it cost him to alter his weapons would be made up for in the effectiveness of their new, temporary damage type. He left his wand unchanged, however, as he was wary of the magic spheres the constructs each had. His senses could clearly make out their magical nature, which his wand's original damage would be effective against.

As the construct continued to hammer away at the chrysalis golem, its sphere floated out to hover over the golem's head. The construct's final arm rose from behind its main body to touch the sphere, which started to vibrate and grow. Clive immediately directed the beam of his wand to lock onto the sphere, while his staff repeatedly fired bolts into the construct's body. The magical bolts exploded on contact, also affecting the chrysalis golem. The damage caused new runes to form on the golem's body. The sphere above the Golem continued to grow but the disruptive power of the wand slowed that growth to a crawl.

At the far end of the cell, the distance from the rest of the team and the glow stones they carried made the shadowy darkness a playground for Jason. He danced among the last three constructs, an elusive, flickering shadow. The disadvantage was that his only viable source of damage was his sword, which would take time to build up enough power to be an effective threat.

Item: [Dread Salvation] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

A sword crafted with gratitude, in hope it would be of the greatest use in the moment of greatest need. It was forged with passion and expertise to be a reliable companion, bestowing upon it an incredible potential (weapon, sword).

- Effect: If a special attack that applies an affliction is made with this sword, but the subject of the attack has a physical immunity to it, an instance of [Stone Cutter] is applied to the blade.
- Effect: If a special attack that applies an affliction is made with this sword, but the subject of the attack has a magical immunity to it, an instance of [Spell Breaker] is applied to the blade.

- [Stone Cutter] (magic, stacking): All attacks deal additional resonating-force damage; highly effective against physical defences. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
 - [Spell Breaker] (magic, stacking): All attacks deal additional disruptive-force damage; highly effective against magical defences and incorporeal entities. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

Jason moved amongst the constructs like a spirit, doing all he could to hold their attention with his minimal damage. The more he could distract the back half of the enemies, the quicker his allies would deal with the front and move to assist him.

- Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] and [Price of Absolution] on [Tartarian Golem].
 - [Tartarian Golem] is immune to [Sin].
 - [Sin] does not take effect.

 - Affliction immunity has triggered an effect on weapon [Dread Salvation].
 - Weapon [Dread Salvation] has gained an instance of [Stone Cutter].

 - [Tartarian Golem] is immune to [Price of Absolution].
 - [Price of Absolution] does not take effect.

 - Affliction immunity has triggered an effect on weapon [Dread Salvation].
 - Weapon [Dread Salvation] has gained an instance of [Stone Cutter].
-

Until his allies could join move to help, Jason had the assistance of Gordon, whose beam attacks proved more attention-getting than Jason. One beam was disruptive-force, which weakened and eventually broke the magical spheres, forcing the constructs to form new ones. The other beam was resonating force, an effective weapon against the rigid, stone bodies of the constructs.

Shade had informed Jason that the constructs almost certainly relied on purely magical senses, lacking the sensory organs of a living creature. As Jason had little need of Shade's shadow bodies in the darkened area, Shade posited that he might be able to hide Jason from their senses entirely. For each of Shade's bodies subsumed into Jason's shadow, he could mask an aspect of Jason's presence, such as heat or sound. It apparently also extended to more unusual senses.

Jason declined, however, as he needed to hold the constructs' attention. Their spheres moved around and their arms lashed out, striking nothing but hard floor and empty air. Jason may not have been Sophie's equal, but he had the skills imprinted on him by skill books and consolidate with a year of training and experience. He had become formidable in his own right.

The three constructs became two as Humphrey moved past Sophie and started hammering on one of them, diverting its attention. He started with the strongest of his special attacks, which rocked the construct back, in spite of its great weight.

Ability: [Unstoppable Force] (Might)

- Special attack.
 - Cost: High mana, extreme stamina.
 - Cooldown: 1 minute.

 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (07%).

 - Effect (iron): Melee attack with massive momentum, dealing large amounts of additional resonating-force and disruptive-force damage. Requires a heavy weapon.

 - Effect (bronze): For each enemy struck the cooldown of this ability and the cost of the next use of this ability are reduced.
-

After week after week of almost hourly battles, the team was quick to pick up on one another's rhythms. Belinda was at the ready and immediately reset Humphrey's attack.

Ability: [Renewed Effort] (Adept)

- Special ability (recovery).
 - Base cost: Moderate mana.
 - Cooldown: Varies.

 - Current rank: Iron 8 (14%).

 - Effect (iron): Reset the cooldown of a single ability of a single ally. It must be an ability you are aware of with a cooldown of less than one minute. The cooldown of this ability is equal to the time taken from the cooldown of the target ability.
-

Using her magical tattoo, she ended the cooldown on her power, allowing it to reset Humphrey's attack a second time. Jason was almost caught in a sphere as he watched, boggle-eyed, as Humphrey pushed around the giant stone monstrosity as if it were a small child. Humphrey finished the construct off with a shield breaker attack, the specialty resonating-force power inflicting even more damage than his unstoppable force attack.

Sophie, in the mean time, had neatly disassembled her opponent. Where Humphrey left nothing but ruined chunks, Sophie had taken her golem apart joint by joint and then smashed the bowl, causing the sphere she had been dodging to wink out and not return.

"Sophie!" Neil called out, and she turned to look. The sphere of the first construct had finally grown large enough to encapsulate Neil's golem, which was suddenly covered in a crystal cocoon within the sphere. Trapped in the sphere and entered into its inert, chrysalis

state, the golem was no longer any kind of protector for Belinda, Neil and Clive. Belinda stepped up to buy the time the team needed.

With her power-resetting abilities expended, Belinda knew it was time to change roles. She starting by summoning a suit of heavy armour, plus a hammer and shield, which blinked into existence on her person.

Ability: [Bag of Tricks] (Magic)

- Special Ability (dimension).
- Cost: None
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 8 (08%).

- Effect (iron): You have a personal, dimensional storage space. You may equip any item in your storage space directly onto your person or unequip anything on your person directly to your storage space.

She activated another power that made her grow taller and bulk-out with muscle, her clothes and equipment growing with her.

Ability: [Counterfeit Combatant] (Charlatan)

- Special ability (boon).
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 1 minute.

- Current rank: Iron 4 (74%).

- Effect (iron): Gain a significant increase to the [Power] attribute and temporary proficiency with armour and melee weaponry. Your physique enlarges, with equipment shifting to match.

As prepared as she could be, she squared her shoulders and moved to intercept the construct. She was only an iron-rank combatant, however, and a makeshift one at that. This became painfully obvious as she was rapidly pushed back, overwhelmed by the construct's multiple, irregular attacks. Her only saving grace was the construct's sphere was still occupied containing the chrysalis golem. The construct apparently unaware that the golem was in an inert state.

Sophie appeared, moving through the room like a breeze. She took over from a grateful Belinda, who had suffered something of a beating from the many-armed construct. The

shields and healing supplied by Neil had been the only thing that let her hold up against the higher-rank enemy even for the short time she had managed.

At the other end of the cell block, Humphrey moved on one of the now two remaining constructs. They were now ignoring Jason, in spite of the growing power of his sword, rightly recognising the larger threat.

Humphrey could not take the two constructs down as quickly as the first two, needing to wait for his most potent abilities to come off cooldown. His shield breaker attack, fortunately, had a short cooldown, made all the shorter by Belinda's aura.

Ability: [Masterful] (Adept)

- Aura (recovery).
- Base cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 7 (55%).

- Effect (iron): Abilities of allies within the aura come off cooldown more quickly.

In between hits with his big-ticket attack, Humphrey fought using another of his special attacks. The human aptitude for special attacks had caused him to awaken an array of them, contributing to his potent offensive capability.

Ability: [Relentless Assault] (Might)

- Special attack.
- Cost: Low stamina, increasing with each successive attack.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (02%).

- Effect (iron): Each use of this attack in quick succession increases the damage of this attack. Damage is of the same type caused by a normal attack.

- Effect (bronze): After a threshold of successive attacks is reached, escalating resonating-force damage is dealt with each attack.

Even this back-up attack of Humphrey's started putting paid to the construct he was fighting in relatively short order. He finished it with a shield breaker attack and moved onto the next construct as Jason realised that his contribution to the fight really would be minimal.

As he and Humphrey engaged the last construct at the back, the remaining one at the front was now squaring off against Sophie. Clive's staff had left it pocked with damage and

Sophie was doing the same, but it was the awakening of Neil's golem that signalled the end of that fight.

The golem explosively emerged from the crystal chrysalis. Shards of razor-sharp crystal shot out wildly, shredding the sphere containing the golem. Revealed in the wake of the detonated cocoon, the golem was leaner than it had been before, now with four arms, like that of its opponent, although more traditionally placed, two to each side of the golem's body.

With the disappearance of its first glowing sphere the construct created another in its bowl, which began floating it towards the newly reformed golem. The golem hammered the sphere with a fist and the bubble not only burst, but blasted force back at its creator. As the construct was rocked back on its legs the golem, more agile than before, moved in smoothly to start hammering away with its fists. The crude, blunt appendages vibrated as they struck, sending shockwaves through the enemy construct.

The new and improved chrysalis golem took out its enemy almost as quick as Humphrey, who was finishing the last of the last of the constructs up the back.

The team regrouped in the middle of the cell block. Clive and Neil enthusiastically told Jason and Humphrey about Belinda's stalwart efforts in buying time for Sophie to come to their aid.

"Still," Neil said. "Not as bad as we thought, in the end."

"Seriously?" Jason asked. "You're doing it again?"

"The bad thing already came out," Neil said. "What are the odds of there being another..."

He trailed off as the cell block filled with the sound of grinding stone.

Chapter 233

I'm Sick of Fighting Magic Rocks

The now-familiar sound of griding stone echoed through the cell block. The first time, it had been small holes in the walls and ceiling. The second, large holes in the floor. The group looked around for the new source of the grating noise.

"It's coming from the cells," Humphrey said. "All the cells."

The team looked through the rusty bars and spotted apertures that had appeared in the floor behind them.

"How many cells are there?" Sophie asked.

"Twelve cells to a side, per level; two levels to each side," Belinda said. "Almost fifty, all up."

"How can stuff rise up from the floors of the upper cells?" Neil asked. "They'd just come from the ones below, right?"

"Dimensional spaces," Belinda said. "Like the powers you and I got from the Reaper stones, Neil."

In each cell, a large glass box rose up from the floor. All of them were filled with a sickly yellow fog, from which the team could sense the auras within, currently in a dormant state.

"Those are bronze-rank auras," Sophie said. "Are we ready for that?"

"We have to be," Humphrey said. "So, yes."

Blood red light shone over their feet and they turned to see it was shining under the large doors they had used to trigger the room's defences in the first place. It seemed to be a trigger for whatever was inside the glass cases as the team felt the auras within them surge into wakefulness.

"Time to even out the numbers a little," Humphrey said, producing a bag of chalk dust and hurriedly pouring out a circle. He took out his summoner's die and rolled it on the floor, the face up rune glowing as it came to a stop.

"Oh no," Humphrey said as five large fish made of carved bone were summoned into being and started, flopping helplessly on the floor.

"The fish again?" Jason said. "Maybe you shouldn't be rolling the dice on the important fights. Literally and figuratively."

"It's a one in twelve chance," Humphrey said. Rather than have his helpless summons underfoot he dismissed them and they vanished. Neil's summon was still present, the crystalline golem maintaining its more advanced, post-chrysalis form. Leaner

and more agile than its basic shape, it had four arms ending in fists capable of powerful vibration attacks.

“Do we go smash those glass cases?” Neil asked. “We’d have to kick our way through the bars, right?”

“I suspect whatever is in there will come to us,” Jason said. “If you want to go into a prison cell were some unknown creature is about to burst out, though, be my guest. Actually, you’re the healer. You have to stay here.”

The sound of shattering glass signalled that their thus-far unknown enemies were about to make an appearance. The sickly-looking smoke that had been in the glass boxes came pouring out through the cell bars. The volume of it suggested that either the fog had been incredibly compressed in the glass cases or it was being continually fed through wherever the glass cases had arisen from. It obscured the team’s vision of the cell interiors as they heard the bars start to swing open with reluctant, rusty shrieks.

The creatures that emerged from the smoke were roughly humanoid; broad, heavy and hairless, with dark, scaly skin. Their arms were longer and more powerful than their legs, ending in thick, three-fingered hands. They had tiny, sunken eyes and nostrils in flat, noiseless faces. Their wide mouths were filled with misshapen teeth, like fragments of shattered, yellow stone. They pushed their way through cell doors barely large enough to fit them.

“They don’t look weak,” Neil said.

The smoke thinned as it moved into the room ahead of the creatures, filling the cell block with an unpleasant haze.

-
- Poison cloud had inflicted you with [Breath of Tartarus].
 - You have resisted [Breath of Tartarus].
 - You have gained in instance of [Resistant].
 - You have gained in instance of [Integrity].

Jason looked to his companions with concern. They were more vulnerable than he was, not sharing the power to grow stronger from afflictions.

Ability: [Sin Eater] (Sin)

- Special ability (recovery, holy).
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Increased resistance to afflictions. Gain an instance of [Resistant] each time you resist an affliction or cleanse an affliction using essence abilities.
 - Effect (bronze): Gain an instance of [Integrity] for each affliction you resist or remove using essence abilities.
 - [Resistant] (boon, holy, stacking): Resistance to afflictions is increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Consumed to negate instances of [Vulnerable] on a 1:1 basis.
 - [Integrity] (heal-over-time, mana-over-time, stamina-over-time, holy): Periodically recover a small amount of health, stamina and mana. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

The rest of the team were not completely vulnerable, with Sophie and Jason's auras both shielding them.

Ability: [Cleansing Breeze] (Swift)

- Aura (holy, cleanse).
 - Cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.
 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
 - Effect (iron): Allies within the aura have increased resistance to curses, diseases, magic afflictions, poisons and unholy afflictions. This is a holy effect. Negates poisons in the air; this is a cleanse effect.
 - Effect (bronze): Allies within the aura are periodically cleansed of curses, diseases, magic afflictions, poisons and unholy afflictions. Mana and stamina recovery effects on allies have greater effect.
-

Cleansing breeze was one of the precious few powers that had reached bronze for Sophie, accelerated by a preponderance of poisonous monsters in the city. Thorny plant monsters, spitting frog monsters, snake monsters. The team had a good amount of cleansing between them, which made such creatures easy pickings, as well as helping them accelerate the advancement of those powers.

In the case of Sophie's aura, it would slowly but surely cleanse many types of affliction from her allies. It was already purifying the fog around them and, added to Jason's aura, left the team was in relatively good stead.

Ability: [Hegemony] (Sin)

- Aura (holy, unholy).

- Base cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.
 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
 - Effect (iron): Allies within the aura have increased resistance to afflictions, while enemies within the aura have their resistance to afflictions reduced. Enemy resistances are further reduced for each instance of [Sin] they are suffering from.
 - Effect (bronze): Inflicts an instance of [Sin] on enemies that make physical or magical attacks against allies within the aura. Instances applied in this way cannot be resisted.
-

Belinda, Sophie and Neil suffered the worst, their iron-rank constitutions struggling against the poison even with the powers bolstering their resistance. Jason clasped a hand on Neil's shoulder.

"Feed me your sins."

Red life force emerged from Neil, tainted by the same colour as the mist. The taint disappeared into Jason's hand, leaving Neil looking relieved as his now-healthy life force returned to his body.

Ability: [Feast of Absolution] (Sin)

- Spell (recovery, cleanse, holy).
 - Base cost: Low mana.
 - Cooldown: None.
 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
 - Effect (iron): Cleanse all curses, diseases, poisons and unholy afflictions from a single target. Additionally cleanse all holy afflictions if the target is an ally. Recover stamina and mana for each affliction cleansed. This ability ignores any effect that prevents cleansing. Cannot target self.
 - Effect (bronze): Enemies suffer an instance each of [Penance] and [Legacy of Sin] for each condition cleansed from them.
 - [Penance] (affliction, holy, damage-over-time, stacking): Deals ongoing transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, dropping off as damage is dealt.
 - [Legacy of Sin] (affliction, holy, stacking): You are considered more damaged for the purposes of execute ability damage scaling. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

While this was going on, some of the monsters had already moved in to the attack. The team had their backs to the large doors, so the monsters wouldn't be able to flank them, although they would be able to drop down from above. While Sophie stepped forward with Neil's golem to hold off the first wave of attackers, Humphrey vaulted up to the mezzanine on their left with a flap of conjured dragon wings.

Humphrey engaged with one of the creatures that had been about to drop down. It's lengthy arms gave it reach, and the knobby scales running along them made those arms as tough as any weapon. The monster may not have been a match for Humphrey but it was still disconcertingly strong and tough, given how many they knew to be gathering, unseen in the poison haze.

Jason used his magic boots to leap up to the mezzanine on the other side, likewise engaging a monster. He inflicted a rapid series of slashes, the creature's reach no match for that of Jason's shadowy arm.

Ability: [Hand of the Reaper] (Dark)

- Conjunction (disease, unholy).
- Cost: Low mana-per-second.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Conjure a highly flexible, semi-substantial shadow-arm that can extend or shrink. Conjured items can be conjured into the shadow hand. Can be used to make melee special attacks. Special attacks made using the arm inflict [Creeping Death] in addition to other effects.

- Effect (bronze): You can conjure a second arm. Special attacks made using the arms inflict [Rigor Mortis] in addition to other effects.

- [Creeping Death] (damage-over-time, disease, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until the disease is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

- [Rigor Mortis] (affliction, unholy, stacking): Penalty to the [Speed] and [Recovery] attributes. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Each time a new instance is inflicted, deals necrotic damage for each existing instance.

Jason's dagger barely drew blood from the scaly skin, but all Jason needed were shallow cuts. With just a few slashes, more than a dozen afflictions were loaded onto the monster. Jason's conjured dagger was the source of many, but not all of them, such as the special attack he was using

Ability: [Punish] (Sin)

- Special attack (melee, curse, holy).
- Cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Inflicts necrotic damage and the [Sin] affliction.

- Effect (bronze): Inflicts or refreshes the duration of [Price of Absolution].

- [Sin] (affliction, curse, stacking): All necrotic damage taken is increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

- [Price of Absolution] (affliction, holy): Suffer transcendent damage for each instance of [Sin] cleansed from you.

Neither Jason nor the creature were going to wait for the afflictions to slowly devour it. It lunged at Jason, although its relatively short legs and the afflictions it already suffered from made it a little slow. Jason easily stepped into one of Shade's bodies and out from another that had slipped past the creature while it was engaged with Jason, giving him plenty of time to cast a quick spell before the creature turned around to face him again.

"Suffer the cost of your transgressions."

Ability: [Punition] (Doom)

- Spell.
 - Cost: Moderate mana.
 - Cooldown: 30 seconds.

 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

 - Effect (iron): Inflicts necrotic damage for each curse, disease, poison and unholy affliction the target is suffering.

 - Effect (bronze): Inflicts or refreshes the duration of [Penitence].

 - [Penitence] (affliction, holy): Gain an instance of [Penance] for each a curse, disease, poison or unholy effect that is cleansed from you. This is a holy effect.

 - [Penance] (affliction, holy, damage-over-time, stacking): Deals ongoing transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, dropping off as damage is dealt.
-

The creature staggered as its muscles withered with necrosis, even as its wounds glowed with the transcendent damage starting to ravage it from the inside out. It lunged at Jason again with no more effect, Jason easily able to move from one of Shade's bodies to the other like a bully playing keep-away. He cast another spell.

"Feed me your sins."

The creature's life force became visible, tainted with the storm of affliction within it. Ugly curses, poisons and other horrors Jason inflicted swirled about with the shining transcendence of holy afflictions until they were drained out, siphoned off into Jason's outstretched hand. Even more of the holy afflictions were left in their place as the creature's life force once again became unseen.

-
- 18 afflictions have been cleansed from [Tartarian Brute].
 - 36 Instances of [Penance] have been inflicted on [Tartarian Brute].
 - 18 Instances of [Legacy of Sin] have been inflicted on [Tartarian Brute].

 - Your mana and stamina have been replenished.
 - Stamina and mana cannot exceed normal maximum values. Excess stamina and mana are lost.

The brute stumbled to a halt as the transcendent damage devastated its body, lighting it up from the inside like some divine being, alighted upon the earth. Jason tilted his head as he watched the creature, one of the few he had encountered capable of surviving this far into his ability sequence. He chanted the incantation for the coup de grâce.

"Mine is the judgement, and the judgement is death."

Ability: [Verdict] (Doom)

- Spell (execute)
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Deals a small amount of transcendent damage. As an execute effect, damage scales exponentially with the enemy's level of injury.

- Effect (bronze): Base damage is increased for each instance of [Penance] on the target.

The penance afflictions on the creature increased the base damage of the execute power, while the legacy of sin affliction made the damage escalation ramp up much faster.

The multiplicative affect of the two affliction stacks made for a shower of transcendent light that left behind not so much as a drop of blood.

Jason had never killed something that tough that quickly, but of course Humphrey had already finished his first and was making short work of a second. Another brute came lumbering out of the poison fog and Jason just raised his hand. Blood seeped from his palm for a short moment, after which a torrent of leeches came spraying out over the creature. Jason paid it no more attention and leapt from his side of the room over the gap to Humphrey on the opposite mezzanine.

“Can you drop these upper levels at this end, so they can’t drop down on the team?” Jason asked as Humphrey kicked a dead brute off his sword.

Humphrey gave the brick floor beneath them an assessing glance.

“Yeah. You want to go backs to the wall and let them come to us?”

“No, but we can’t have them fall on our heads either,” Jason said. “You keep the others safe while Neil and Sophie hold the poison at bay.”

“And what about the room full of monsters and poison gas?”

Shade emerged from Jason’s shadow as Gordon manifested with a surge of his aura. Jason glanced across at Colin, now bound up in his bloody-cloth humanoid shape.

“I’m sick of fighting magic rocks,” Jason said. “You can leave this lot to us.”

Sophie’s aura was thinning out the gas in the area immediately surrounding the team and would soon have it cleansed entirely. Humphrey had used his shield breaker attack to shatter the mezzanine at their end of the room, so the creatures were only able to come at them at ground level, from one direction.

Sophie, Humphrey and Neil’s golem beat them back, assisted by Clive and his magical weapons. Neil watched over the whole group but made sure to keep a careful eye on Belinda, who was suffering the most from the gas not yet fully cleared out. Whenever it started to get the best of her, he would purge it from her with a spell.

Ability: [Clean Slate] (Prosperity)

- Spell (cleanse, heal-over-time, holy).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Negate boons on a willing subject. Cleanse target of afflictions of all types except wounding. The base strength of the cleanse effect is enhanced for each boon negated.
 - Effect (bronze): Target gains a heal-over-time effect that had additional effectiveness against wounding afflictions. The strength of the healing effect is increased for each boon negated.
-

From the haze of poison fog, the team saw flashes of transcendent light and heard horrifying screams. They could only assume they came from the creatures because it definitely wasn't Jason's voice, although none of the creatures Humphrey and Sophie cut down had made so much as a grunt as they died.

At first the brutes surged in on them but slowly their numbers petered out. Finally, the last one to appear was in such a miserable state of decomposition that it looked like a zombie, complete with staggering shamble as it emerged from the fog before falling onto what was left of its face. A bloody strip of cloth snaked out of the fog, wrapping around its leg and dragging it back out of sight.

The next thing to come out of the fog were four cloaked figures; Jason, flanked by his familiars. He looked the team over, nodded as he saw they were fine, and his gaze turned to the large doors behind them.

"What's say we see what's back there?"

Chapter 234

Crossing the Threshold

The team waited for the sound of grinding stone that would signal another wave of combat, but the room was as silent as Neil, under Jason's baleful glare.

"I think we're clear," Humphrey said, finally.

The team stopped to rest in the zone of clean air Sophie's power had finishing clearing out, while the poison mist in the rest of the room slowly dispersed. As the haze disappeared, it revealed a horror show of dead creatures piled around the broken remains of the constructs they had destroyed earlier.

Neil tried looting the enemies, but while the constructs yielded a few crafting materials, the creatures yielded nothing. They also didn't disappear into rainbow smoke, showing them to not be monsters, but real creatures.

"These things have been sealed away for who knows how long," Neil said. "Kind of like those priests that Jason set loose."

"My interface called them Tartarian Brutes," Jason said. "The constructs were Tartarian Golems. Does that mean something to anyone?"

All eyes turned to Clive, who shook his head.

"In my world," Jason said, "there's a myth about a realm called Tartarus. It's a prison realm."

"We do seem to be in a prison," Belinda said. "It makes me curious about what's behind these doors."

While Neil had been looting, Clive had been examining the doors. He started drawing magic diagrams on them in golden lines with his ritual power. Jason noted that, unlike the attempts of the adventurers that came before, they were being placed in the middle of the doors, rather than around the locks.

"You're not trying to crack the locks?" he asked Clive.

"Those are a decoy," Clive said. "A key tip for ritual magic – and life, really – is to not do the same thing as the people who died trying. Also, a twin-circle ritual is a very bad idea if you don't know what you're doing."

Clive completed the ritual, the two magical circles lighting up on the door. The red light shining from underneath faded away and there was a pair of audible clicks from the locks. Clive dismissed his glowing ritual circles with a wave of his hands and pushed on the doors, swinging them open.

Beyond was a circular chamber with a vaulted ceiling and only one feature. In the middle of the room was a stone plinth, on which was what looked like a solid block of crystal encasing a sword. Around the block of crystal was a sphere of shimmering light, the same gold, silver and blue produced by Jason's transcendent damage powers.

The sword in the block was elaborately crafted into a sinister form. The blade was some kind of black metal, engraved with glowing red runes down its length. The hilt was constructed of some manner of red crystal and black stone, like ruby and onyx. The grip had sharp thorns, meaning that anyone who grasped it would be stabbing their own hand.

"It kind of looks like Jason's dagger," Neil said. Jason conjured his dagger into his hand, holding up for the group to compare. Jason's dagger was likewise an ornate object of black obsidian and red crystal.

"You're not wrong," Jason said. "It has to be coincidence, though right? I mean, if you're making a sweet-looking red and black bladed weapon, they're all going to end up with a certain level of similarity."

"Do those runes on the blade mean anything?" Sophie asked. Jason and Clive both had translation powers, so they looked closer.

"They don't say anything coherent," Jason said. "They just represent various concepts."

"Not ideal concepts, either," Clive added. "Soul. Power. Hunger. Life. Feast."

"That does sound pretty bad," Neil said. "As in, Jason's powers bad."

"Hey..."

"I'm more interested in that energy around it," Clive said. "It seems very strange to both aura and magical senses."

"It looks like Jason's dissolve people into nothing powers," Sophie said. "I'm not going near it."

"Agreed," Neil said.

Jason turned his attention to the shimmering light, slowly moving closer.

"Be careful," Humphrey warned, but Jason instead extended a hand toward the light.

"Jason, you should give me time to examine that before doing anything rash," Clive said.

Jason ignored them, having felt something familiar about the energy. As his fingertips came in contact with it, a bolt of sensation rocketed through his body and he yanked his arm back, like it had been shocked. He stumbled back a couple of steps before righting himself.

“It’s a soul,” Jason said, his voice haunted. “This light is a disembodied soul, somehow held here.”

“Are you sure?” Clive asked.

“Completely.”

Clive scratched his head as he looked at the light in confusion.

“That shouldn’t even be possible.”

“I’m increasingly convinced that impossible isn’t a thing,” Jason said.

“So, someone has turned an actual, living soul into a box?” Humphrey asked. “Isn’t that a lot to keep people away from a sword?”

“It isn’t trying to keep things out,” Jason said. “It’s trying to keep something in.”

“Are you sure?” Clive said. “Even with enhanced aura senses, it’s like there’s something obscuring it.”

“You can touch it, if you like,” Jason said. “I wouldn’t advise it, though. It’s much higher rank than we are. At least gold, and possibly even diamond. Just coming into contact with it had quite the spiritual kick, but its purpose was immediately clear. Everything it is has been directed to a singular intent: keeping this sword exactly where it is.”

“I’m going to touch it,” Clive said.

“Just be warned,” Jason said. “It’s going to kick you right in the soul.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t,” Humphrey suggested.

“I have to,” Clive said. “Call it a spirit of enquiry. I’d rather go through whatever punch-back it will give me than live my life knowing I had the chance to experience something so rare and unique, but didn’t have the courage.”

Clive reached out his hand and, after a brief moment of hesitation, touched the light. The breath shot out of him and he toppled like a tree, falling to the ground, unconscious. Neil quickly dropped to one knee to examine him.

“He’s fine,” Neil quickly said. “He just had a jolt to the system, causing some soul-body dysphoria. Best to let it settle than try and forcibly wake him up.”

“That soul-body thing sounds bad,” Sophie said.

“On a regular person it would be,” Neil said as he pulled a pillow from his dimensional satchel and placed it under Clive’s head. “For an essence user, it’s kind of like holding your breath for too long and passing out. He’s going to wake up with a fierce headache, but nothing more than that.”

The team gathered around Clive, looking down at him with concern.

“Really, he’ll be fine,” Neil said. “It won’t take him long to wake up.”

“Alright,” Belinda said. “I guess we decide what to do about this sword while we wait.”

“We don’t do anything,” Jason said. “Someone or something went to considerable effort to contain it here. All that stuff we fought in the cell block was little more than a no trespassing sign compared to the power involved with this. If someone went to the trouble of doing this to a person’s soul, just to keep this thing locked up, I don’t think letting it loose is a good idea. Even assuming we can figure out how.”

“So, after all the fighting we did to get here, you just want to walk away?” Belinda asked.

“Yes,” Jason said. “That’s exactly what I want to do.”

“I’m willing to take Jason’s advice on that,” Humphrey said. “Sophie, Neil?”

“Oh, I was happy to leave it there when I saw that fact that the handle stabs you,” Neil said. “That tells you all you need to know about the kind of weapon it is.”

“It’s not as if we’re even looking for a sword,” Sophie said. “You conjure yours, Humphrey, and you’re not giving up the one Gary made, right Asano?”

“Exactly right,” Jason said.

“That just leaves you, Lindy,” Sophie said. “It might not hurt to have some good equipment for your turn into a warrior power.”

“No thanks,” Belinda said. “I’ll stick with weapons that only stab the other guy.”

Clive groaned loudly as he gained consciousness. He groggily sat up, gripped his head in his hands and let out another coughing groan. Neil dropped back down to examine him.

“How do you feel?” Neil asked.

“Like someone dropped a sailing ship on me,” Clive said, looking past Neil to Jason.

“How did you avoid that thing hitting your soul like a hammer?” Clive asked.

“I didn’t,” Jason said. “I did warn you.”

“I wish I had your resilience of soul,” Clive said.

“No,” Jason said flatly. “You don’t.”

“We’ve decided to leave the sword where it is,” Humphrey said to Clive. “Unless you’re looking to reopen the debate.”

“No,” Clive said, shaking his head and then wincing at the pain it brought. “I felt that soul. What it went through to put that thing there and keep it there. I’m not even sure we could get that sword out, but I am very sure that we shouldn’t.”

Neil and Jason were meditating outside where the cloud house had been set up. They were both anticipating an ascension to bronze-rank after the battle in the cell block

and didn't want to make a mess inside. The cloud house would be able to clear it up, but doing so would just accelerate the rate at which it would consume the supply of crystal wash Jason had fed into it. It had been a huge amount and should be sufficient for years, but there was no point accelerating the consumption when it wasn't necessary.

Neil's summoning power was his last remaining iron-rank ability. The golem had fought like a champion in their most recent conflict, so no one was surprised when Neil crossed the threshold into bronze. He wandered out from the secluded bit of ruin where he had finished his advancement, having washed himself down with a bottle of crystal wash after purging all the muck from his body in the transition.

He had stripped down to his underwear, so his waiting teammates could see that his blocky, weight-lifter physique had clearly changed to one of more sleek, yet still built-up muscle. It had also made his hair fall out and his fingernails grow strangely long. Jason helped remedy those minor issues with grooming scissors and some of Jory's hair growth cream.

Jason's change did not come that day, but Humphrey designated a day for rest. It was something they had done around once a week, taking a break from the otherwise unrelenting schedule of training and combat. They had killed more monsters than it was worth bothering to count, although they had been counting the flesh abominations. They had found and destroyed forty-one of the abominations thus far, which Shade's numbers put at around a tenth of the city's total.

Shade's familiar power advanced ahead of Gordon's, the shadow Jason's most constant companion. Jason had come to rely on his shadowy presence, available even when an apocalypse monster or an interdimensional reality assassin were socially inappropriate.

-
- All [Dark Essence] abilities have reached [Bronze 0].
 - Linked attribute [Speed] has increased from [Iron 9] to [Bronze 0].
-

Jason's power attribute had reached bronze over the course of their time in the astral space, taking his strength officially beyond what any normal human was capable of. It was the transition of his speed attribute that really made him feel like he had truly transformed, however. It affected not just his ability to run fast, but his reflexes, agility, dexterity and proprioception.

His newly ascended speed attribute also combined with his power attribute to make him capable of incredible feats. When he really should have gone back to meditation, his

team found him doing somersaults on the spot and climbing up ruins by jumping from wall to wall.

“I feel like a video game character!”

“No one knows what that means,” Sophie said.

“You’ve been able to move like this for as long as I’ve known you,” Jason told her.

“How are you not constantly running around and giggling like an idiot?”

“You should have seen her when she was younger,” Belinda confided, getting a glare from Sophie.

Jason finally settled down and resumed his meditation, after which it did not take long before Gordon’s power likewise crossed the line.

-
- All [Doom Essence] abilities have reached [Bronze 0].
 - Linked attribute [Spirit] has increased from [Iron 9] to [Bronze 0].

 - Progress to bronze rank: 100% (4/4 essences complete).

 - All your attributes have reached bronze rank.

 - You have reached bronze rank.
 - You have gained resistance to iron-rank and lower damage sources and effects.
 - The potency of your aura has increased.
 - Your aura senses have improved.

 - Progress to silver rank: 00%.
-

Jason’s transition from iron to bronze rank was much less violent than from normal to iron. That time, his newly created body had been composed of what Clive called trash magic, while his iron-rank one was closer to an ideal state for his rank. It still purged a large quantity of black, stinking biomass, however, that he washed off with crystal wash.

He trimmed his suddenly grown nails and regrew his hair with the cream, leaving his beard to grow back on its own. Humphrey and Clive had both grown beards during their time in the astral space, likewise losing them during their rank-ups. Neil, being an elf, had never grown more than a light scruff that Jason found enviably appealing.

Jason really did feel transformed. He was a new man and he felt it. Just moving around in his bronze-rank body felt different. His spirit attribute reaching bronze also had a big impact as it increased not just the sixth sense that detected auras but took his other five senses beyond the bounds of human potential. The world was suddenly alive with a nuance of colour like nothing he had experienced. He could pick out scents like he was cataloguing them and his hearing could pick out the world around him almost as well as

his vision. He could feel the air on his skin, taste it on his tongue. It was as if the world had transformed with him.

“Good, right?” Humphrey asked with a smile as he found Jason looking into the distance with a goofy grin.

“Oh, yeah.”

“We can handle monsters, or equivalent, of higher rank than us in large numbers, now,” Humphrey said. “Remember those teams we saw at the mirage arena in Jayapura? We can stand shoulder to shoulder with any of them, now.”

“Some people might think that means we can relax a little,” Jason asked. “Something tells me that you think it means we have to train even harder.”

“I can confidently say that we’re at an elite level for our rank,” Humphrey said. “That’s not such a big deal at iron rank, though. If we’re going to say the same at bronze and silver, we need to start the work now.”

“You know, Humphrey, the parents of every girlfriend you ever have are going to love you.”

“What do they think of you?” Humphrey asked.

“I haven’t gotten that far too many times,” Jason said. “There was my first girlfriend, whose parents liked my brother more. Which worked out, in the end. Everyone between her and Cassandra was more casual. Thalia Mercer liked me. Her husband, not so much, I think. The thing with Thadwick, you know.”

“I was always uneasy about Gabrielle’s parents,” Humphrey said. “Religious is good, but some people take it to a point that it gets a little unnerving.”

“Putting aside the religious being good thing, I know what you mean,” Jason said. “You get those really religious people with that weird intensity, you know?”

“Oh yeah,” Humphrey said. “I mean, the goddess of knowledge. It should be a fairly relaxed group, right? They kept asking me what I was reading. They did not like hearing that I didn’t have a lot of time to read with all the training. Speaking of which, we will be getting back to it. A few days to let you and Neil get a feel for your new power level. Then we’ll go after the blood weaver and see what we can find from what’s left of the cultists.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “I have some stuff to do before that, though. Growth items, familiar summoning. Basically, a bunch of rituals. Neil has his growth items, too.”

“We can take tomorrow,” Humphrey said. “After that, though, it’s back to work.”

Chapter 235

Anyone Can Be Useful

"I actually got the materials pretty cheap," Jason said. "Gary made it from local materials in the first place, so I just needed higher-grade versions of the same stuff."

Jason had drawn out the diagram for the ritual of ascension that would have his sword, like he had himself, advance from iron-rank to bronze. He was now laying out ingots of blood gold and star-fall silver, piles of quintessence gems and neat stacks of bronze-rank spirit coins.

The rest of the team were lounging about on the porch of the cloud house in hanging chairs. Jason turned to look at Sophie who had been staring at him all day.

"What?" he asked.

"What?" she asked.

"You've been looking at me like that all day."

"Like what?" Sophie asked.

"Impassively, I guess," Jason said. "You do everything impassively, so it's hard to differentiate."

"Your face," she said.

"What about my face?"

"Bronze rank," she said. "It made it less awful."

"Yep," Belinda agreed.

"I miss the chin," Neil said. "It kind of looked like some weird essence power."

"It wasn't that bad," Jason said. "Humphrey, tell them it wasn't that bad."

"It wasn't that bad," Humphrey said. "I'd even say it was good."

"Thank you," Jason said.

"I mean," Humphrey continued, "if I ever ran out of mana and couldn't conjure a sword, it was right there. What do I use for a backup, now?"

Jason looked put upon as the team laughed.

"It really does look good," Belinda said, taking pity on him. "Bronze rank's been good to you. The square-jaw thing you have happening now that is actually not bad. Right, Soph?"

"Its... not terrible."

"That's Sophie language for 'sexy as all get-out,' which I think is a little excessive, but each to their own," Belinda said. It earned her a glare from Sophie, while Jason shook his head and went back to his ritual.

It would have been faster for Clive to perform the ritual, as he had with Neil's growth items, but Clive hadn't offered and Jason hadn't asked. They both understood that if you could advance your growth items yourself, you did it yourself.

The sword was simple and elegant in its design; silvery blade, a simple, red gold hilt with black binding and a short black tassel. Jason carefully placed it at the centre of the magic circle and performed the ritual.

-
- Growth item [Dread Salvation] has advanced from iron rank to bronze rank.
 - Growth item [Dread Salvation] has reached its maximum potential. It must be reforged by the original craftsman in order to advance further.
 - Item [Dread Salvation] has gained new abilities.
-

Clive, Neil and Humphrey had already ranked-up their growth items with no additional effects, and the same had happened for Jason's amulet. His sword was the first of their items to gain new effects.

Item: [Dread Salvation] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

- *A sword crafted with gratitude, in hope it would be of the greatest use in the moment of greatest need. It was forged with passion and expertise to be a reliable companion, bestowing upon it an incredible potential (weapon, sword).*
 - Effect: If a special attack that applies an affliction is made with this sword, but the subject of the attack has a physical immunity to it, an instance of [Stone Cutter] is applied to the blade and an instance of [Vibrant Echo] is inflicted to the enemy.
 - Effect: If a special attack that applies an affliction is made with this sword, but the subject of the attack has a magical immunity to it, an instance of [Spell Breaker] is applied to the blade and an instance of [Radiant Echo] is inflicted to the enemy.
 - [Stone Cutter] (magic, stacking): All attacks deal additional resonating-force damage; highly effective against physical defences. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
 - [Vibrant Echo] (damage-over-time, magic, stacking): Deal ongoing, resonating-force damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
 - [Spell Breaker] (magic, stacking): All attacks deal additional disruptive-force damage; highly effective against magical defences and incorporeal entities. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
 - [Radiant Echo] (damage-over-time, magic, stacking): Deal ongoing, disruptive-force damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

In addition to getting more powerful over time, the sword's new abilities allowed it to leave behind ongoing damage effects, bringing it more in line with Jason's own power set. Magic-type afflictions were easier to dispel than most, but almost nothing was immune to them, unlike Jason's various maledictions. To advance the sword further would require Gary's help, but silver rank was, for the moment, a distant horizon.

He was saving his familiar upgrades for last, so he moved on to the cloud flask. He shoed everyone off the porch and returned the cloud house to its flask, the house taking several minutes to dissolve into smoke and pour into the bottle like a genie.

"There must be a big, involved ritual for an item like the cloud flask," Neil said.

"Nope," Jason said. "You just have to get to bronze rank, then feed the greedy bugger about a squillion bucks worth of goodies."

He shook his head at the bottle as he pulled a funnel from his inventory, placed it in the mouth of flask and then started shoving in fistfuls of quintessence.

"Twenty-two hundred quintessence," he complained. "Two hundred of it dimension quintessence. Remind me to thank to thank Emir again for supplying the goods for the first rank up. No way could I have afforded this, on top of everything else."

Shovelling in all the quintessence gems and then ten thousand spirit coins took longer than the rituals for Jason and Neil's growth weapons put together. Deprived of their comfortable cloud seats, some of the team grew impatient.

"Could you have just used silver coins?" Neil asked. "Or gold. That would have sent it along nicely."

"It's not about the value of the coins," Clive said. "It's about the magic inside them. All that power doesn't just fuel the upgrade but balances out all the magic involved in the transformation, so it doesn't go awry."

"You know," Neil said to Clive, "just once, I'd like something to come up and have you say that you have no idea."

"Hey Clive," Belinda said.

"Yes?"

"How would Neil kill any monsters if we weren't around?"

"I have no idea," Clive said.

"You two are hilarious," Neil said flatly.

"Actually, that was pretty good," Jason said.

"Shut up and play with your bottle."

The cult leader Zato, led Timos and Thadwick across the ruined grounds of the Vane estate. The last remnants of the climate-shifting magic were gone and the desert was

rapidly reclaiming the once lush territory. Now it was nothing but withered remnants and piled ruins, only the now-dormant magical pylons marking had once been a stark line between the estate and the desert.

They arrived at what had one been the manor house, now crumbling stone and dried wood. Zato held out an arm and the limb segmented into pieces, revealing not warm flesh and blood within, but cold iron. The pieces were strung together on a wire, which spooled out as the segments sprung forward, burying themselves in the piled debris.

Moments later, chunks of that debris started floating into the air, more and more of them, moving into an organised shape. The materials melted, wood and stone flowing like water as they blended together to form a strange hybrid material. The material flowed into lines, creating a ritual circle on the ground and then a dome that covered it, leaving only a hole large enough to crawl through.

“As you grow stronger,” Zato said, “Your meagre essence abilities will be supplanted, one by one, by the superior power of the Builder. You will not be bound by mortal limitations, scrabbling for scraps of might from worthless training or miserable monster cores.”

“This will make me strong?” Thadwick asked, nodding at the dome as it neared completion.

“Yes,” Zato said. “So many have passed you over, Thadwick, but I see your true potential. You will prove of supreme value to the Builder, once you are stronger. Enter, and feel the power flow through you.”

After a last, wary look, Thadwick got down and crawled through the hole. When the hole closed behind him and he was plunged into darkness, he panicked for a moment. Then he felt the promised power surging into him. It had only been a matter of moments, but he could feel the strength flowing through him and he started laughing like a madman.

Outside the dome, Zato and Timos could no more hear Thadwick than he could hear them as they walked away.

“When you said you would find something for Thadwick, I was not optimistic,” Timos said. “I didn’t realise that something like this was possible.”

“More than possible, it is necessary,” Zato said. “I was not fully inducted into the leadership, who took their plans with them to the grave fighting on the island. We have need of guidance. Thadwick and the other one...?”

“Dougall,” Timos reminded.

“Right, yes. Thadwick and Dougall are not true believers. They came to us out of desperate, mercenary sensibilities. Half loyalties will be met with half membership. They will pay the rest of their way with sacrifice and will be venerated for their service.”

“Why bother with the ruse?” Timos asked. “Why not just force Thadwick along?”

“Because even with the soul seed inside it, altering a soul is difficult business unless that soul is willing. Why force the poison down his throat when a spoonful of honey will have him gulping it down?”

“Honestly? I want to make him choke on the spoon?”

Zato chuckled.

“How close to ready is Dougall?” Timos asked.

“He will reach the requisite state shortly before the Church of Purity’s people arrive,” Zato said. “The timing is fortuitous. For the moment, make sure that neither Dougall nor Thadwick realise that they are receiving the same treatment.”

“Not a problem,” Timos said. “Dougall is so keen on ingratiating himself that he will do exactly as asked. Thadwick is so self-obsessed that he is oblivious to any of the goings on.”

Zato smiled.

“See? Anyone can be useful, if you find the task that best suits their abilities.”

“It’s big,” Neil said.

“It wouldn’t let me use the blending-in version,” Jason said.

“I don’t think there’s a version of this that you can discreetly move through a jungle,” Humphrey said.

Item: [Cloud Flask] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

- This item is bound to you and cannot be used by anyone else.
- Use the energies within the cloud flask to create buildings and vehicles made of clouds. Available forms are restricted by rank.
- Items contained within the cloud construct when it is returned to the flask are stored in a dimensional space and cannot be recovered until another cloud construct is formed.
- Available forms (iron rank): Cloud house (grand), cloud house (adaptive).
- Available forms (bronze rank): Carriage house (grand).
- Unavailable forms (bronze rank): Carriage house (adaptive).

“A carriage house is meant to be a building that holds carriages,” Jason said. “Not a building that trundles about like one.”

To Jason, the cloud flask’s bronze-rank form looked as much as anything like a massive recreational vehicle, one of the stupidly expensive ones with two levels and a roof deck that movie stars lived in on set. It even had a spot for a driver at the front, although it

was directed by placing hands on a misty orb, rather than a steering wheel. Other than that, Jason could direct its movements mentally.

The cloudy white vehicle with its sunset embellishments stood out brightly amongst the dark stone and deep greenery of the overgrown jungle. There were no wheels, making it something of a hovercraft RV. The boulevards of the overgrown streets were wide, but thick with jungle, making them impassable for the huge vehicle. Jason had moved it back and forth a little, but there really wasn't room to drive around.

The interior was likewise akin to a luxurious RV, with beds, couches and comfortable chairs. There actually was a roof deck. From the inside, translucent mist made for clear windows, although they could not be seen through from the outside.

"Well," Humphrey consoled, "it'll be nice once we're back out of the astral space. "It'll be great for taking long trip so you, me and Clive can visit locations to portal to, later. That's what my mother did all through bronze rank. Travelling the world, having adventures."

"Actually, that sounds kind of awesome. Neil doesn't get an opening credit until season two, though, and it'll be an 'also starring' with his face hidden by a melon or something."

"What?"

"We can figure it out later," Jason said. "I guess I should turn it back into a house, and then finish up. What do you say, fellas? Saving the best for last?"

Gordon appeared with a flash of Jason's aura as Shade appeared from his shadow.

"Gordon says that I should be last," Shade said. Gordon orange orb flashed brightly, which was his signal for no.

"See?" Shade asked. "He really doesn't want to go last."

The orange orb started angrily strobing.

"He's quite vociferous on the topic," Shade continued.

"Shade, stop teasing Gordon," Jason said. "Gordon, it's just an expression. Being last doesn't actually mean you're the best."

A small patch of blood seeped from Jason's neck, turning into a leech that crawled along his shoulder. Jason turned to look at it.

"Colin, you've already ranked up. You can't do it again."

The disconsolate leech slinked back into Jason's neck.

Chapter 236

A Series of Familiar Powers

Shade was not visibly changed in his new, bronze rank vessel; he remained a shadowy figure in a cloak of darkness. The only visible difference was an increase in his number of bodies, from three to seven. He had also gained the ability to exert a small amount of physical force, while remaining an incorporeal entity. It wasn't enough to inflict damage but it would allow him to perform tasks in places too dangerous for people who weren't intangible and didn't have six extra bodies.

It also meant that it was unlikely that Shade's vessel would be completely eliminated in battle. Barring an unusual fight, such as the one against the elemental tyrant that claimed his original iron-rank vessel, he would remain intact. Any bodies that were destroyed could be remade, so long as at least one remained. The only cost would be time and almost all of Jason's mana, making it something not to be done in the midst of combat.

The other new ability Shade had acquired was his own dimensional storage space. It wasn't as capacious as that of Jason, Humphrey or Clive, but was accessible from any of Shade's bodies.

Jason's own storage space, his inventory power, had likewise improved as he reached bronze rank. One of its nuances was the ability to expand the number of slots available through the use of dimensional bags. There were five slots in the corner of the inventory screen interface for placing dimensional bags, but only one had been available and could only be filed with an iron-rank bag.

Jason had filled that slot early in his adventuring career, but he brought two bronze rank bags with him for use once he ranked up. He had to carry them empty, as dimensional bags could only be placed into other dimensional spaces when they themselves contained nothing.

Another boost to his inventory was an increase to the maximum volume per item. He could feel the change instinctively, but would need to experiment to find the exact new limit.

Humphrey and Clive had likewise experienced improvements from their storage abilities reaching bronze. Unlike Jason's power, theirs were essence abilities that gained not just incremental improvements but whole new effects on ranking up. Humphrey's storage space power, magic armoury, now significantly reduced the mana cost of conjuring his weapons and armour. It meant that he no longer had to burn a notable chunk

of mana at the start of every fight, of whenever he switched between his two conjured swords.

Clive's rune gate power had gone through the most impressive change. The original function opened a rune circle portal to his storage space, but was now a full-fledged portal power. Combining dimensional storage and a travel portal in one ability wasn't useful in a fight, but it was easily the most concentrated utility power on the team.

The increase in utility was another indication of the somewhat unusual makeup of the team. Humphrey and Neil were the only members that would slot easily into conventional team roles, with Jason, Clive, Belinda and Sophie all outside the norm to various degrees.

On the relatively normal end of the spectrum were Jason and Sophie. Affliction specialists and dodge tanks were less common variations of the common damage-dealer and guardian roles. Clive was a spell-based damage dealer who only had one attack spell. Belinda was the most extreme, simultaneously filling no set roles and most of them.

A traditional adventuring team used reliable strengths and fixed roles to approach every situation in a similar way, in order to maximise their strengths and minimise their weaknesses. The weakness of Jason's team was the inability to do that. They needed to strategise and adapt to any given circumstance.

The team, in a way, had become something of a reflection of Jason. There were better power sets for everyday monster hunting, but they thrived in meeting challenges that more conventional teams would struggle against. By not being pinned down to one approach, they would be ready when unusual circumstances were thrown their way.

Part of the team's adaptive nature was the inclusion of a lot of utility. Most teams would include at least one storage space power and would count any more as a happy bonus. As for portal or teleportation powers, there was no team that wouldn't jump at the chance. Many teams would take on an otherwise unremarkable, or even downright incompetent member for the simple reason that their repertoire included a portal ability. Jason's team commanded four storage powers and three long-distance travel powers, making them rather enviable.

Stash had also evolved to bronze rank alongside Humphrey, the bonded familiar not requiring a new body to be summoned in the way Jason's familiars did. While as mischievous as ever, he was more confident about revealing his true form, which only Humphrey had seen before. His true shape was small, with a long, serpentine body covered in rainbow scales that ran along him in waves of colour that shimmered and changed. Belinda became completely enchanted with his draconic true form and Stash became enchanted with the praise she heaped upon him.

Gordon went through a slight change when his new body was summoned, with a second pair of glowing, blue and orange eyeball orbs joining the first in floating around his body. This gave him four simultaneous attack beams; two of resonating force that was effective against tough opponents and two of disruptive force, effective against magic and incorporeal beings like Gordon himself. Additionally, he could send two orbs of the same type hurtling off, even flying them around corners before coming together and detonating. The resultant explosion was powerful, but the orbs would take a minute to reform, during which they could not be used to make further attacks..

Making good on his threat, Humphrey pushed the team to stay on the move, hunting down more of the flesh abominations and whatever ordinary monsters they encountered along the way. Eager to push the limits of their new capabilities, both Humphrey and Jason took on flesh abominations alone for the first time.

In Jason's case, his bronze-rank powers were enough to overwhelm the monster's recovery powers much faster. He had already been able to bypass the rank-based damage resistance but now his powers were doing bronze-rank damage. That was only part of the change, as his new afflictions also played a role.

Rigor mortis, inflicted by his shadow arm Reaper power, gave a stacking penalty to the speed and recovery attributes of whatever poor soul he inflicted it upon. His inexorable doom power caused the effect to stack up and up, the penalty to speed making the creature more and more sluggish, even when it took swift forms to try and pin down the elusive Jason. Meanwhile, the penalty to recovery left its ability to hold off the afflictions increasingly diminished, even as the afflictions themselves became worse and worse.

Another key affliction came from Jason's special attack, leech bite. Along with inflicting the bleeding effect, it now also inflicted the same leech toxin poison that Colin did. An instance of the stacking toxin would refresh the bleeding effect whenever it was healed through, leaving the adaptive powers of the flesh abominations unable to stave off Jason's malign powers as effectively as they had in the past.

Humphrey was likewise able to overcome the ability of the abominations to adapt to him, in his case with raw power. He showed off the advantage of being a human special attack specialist with an array of offensive techniques that could take on any kind of enemy. If it took a solid form, the resonating force of his shield breaker attack would crack it like an egg. A more amorphous form would absorb heavy physical blows but be vulnerable to the disruptive force of his spirit reaper attack. His unstoppable force power had a longer cooldown, but would devastate the abominations in whatever form they took.

Humphrey had not taken on any of them himself before Jason and Neil ranked up, as getting them over the line to bronze rank had always been the priority. Now they had, he was happier to let himself loose. Like Jason, he had already been ignoring the rank disparity, but increasing the power of his attacks from iron to bronze-rank had turned him from a threat to a nemesis. He relentlessly pounded away at an abomination that simply couldn't find a form to withstand the oppressive might.

The team were put through their paces as they made a beeline for the centre of the city and the territory of the blood weaver. Of a night they continued to rest in the cloud house, which was now a more secure than ever. The magic of the house was more sophisticated at bronze rank, with stronger defences and a superior ability to hide itself from the senses of wandering monsters.

As they stopped to rest each night, Clive had been taking more precise measurements of the ambient magic, which had been rising at a precipitous rate. He updated the team as they rested for the evening.

"Isn't that a barely measurable increase?" Jason asked as Clive gave them the results of his latest analysis.

"The fact that the increase is measurable at all is alarming," Clive told him. "That it's occurred over just a matter of weeks is insane. We need to figure out what these cultists have done."

"And if we can't question them, because they're mindless blood thralls?" Sophie asked.

"I doubt they'll be mindless," Clive said. "A blood weaver could turn them into witless blood puppets, but more likely it has employed a traditional form of vampirism, where they are subject to the will of the one that turned them, while retaining their own minds."

"We take them alive if we can," Humphrey said. "Not at the risk of endangering the team, though. If we have to put them down, we do it."

"If they aren't any help, that's not the end of the road," Clive said. "Whatever is causing this change isn't something you can just knock out a magic ritual for and off you go. What's happening is more involved than that."

"Any closer to an idea of what that is?" Humphrey asked.

"I've been going through the books Knowledge gave Jason, looking for something that would produce these results. Without more information, though, I'm not even sure what to look for. At this point, more than talking to these cultists, I need to see what tools they brought with them."

Shade now had enough bodies that he could transform into a mount for each member of the team, and bronze rank had apparently enhanced the nature of the mounts he could transform into. For one thing, he could collect multiple bodies together to replicate the self-propelled magical carriages favoured by the Greenstone elite. That was of little use on streets overgrown with jungle, but not the only new trick he had picked up.

Rather than a full vehicle, Shade could also merge fewer bodies to create different individual mounts. By merging his bodies in pairs, he became three creatures that were somewhere between a narrow-bodied beetle and a preying mantis. Each had a glossy black carapace, glowing eyes and huge blade arms with glowing white edges, from which mist softly drifted. They were an intimidating sight.

“Very nice,” Jason said approvingly. “Shade, you’re an absolute champion.”

“These creatures do not appear in this world,” Shade said with his remaining body. “They exist in another world I spent time in while serving as a familiar.”

“Hold on,” Humphrey said. “Jason, you have no problem with these terrifying blade-armed monstrosities, but heidels disturbing?”

“They have two heads, Humphrey. Two heads. Can you imagine having two heads? Imagine if you had a great idea for a recipe, then had to explain it to your other head. That’s not right.”

“Wait, *that’s* your problem?” Humphrey asked.

“What if you’re eating something delicious? Either one head gets left out or each one only gets half as much, because they have to share a stomach. Half as much! What if it’s a delicious cake!”

“That was a nice cake you brought out for the rank-up feast,” Neil said. “Did you make that yourself?”

“I did. The secret is to sweeten the cream before whipping it and really make it the highlight.”

“Was there leftover cake?” Sophie asked, with a suspiciously bushy moustache.

“There was not,” Jason said.

“Boo,” she jeered, before turning into an iridescent blue jungle lizard.

“At least he’s figured out how to shape shift clothes, now,” actual Sophie said.

“They’re still part of his body, so technically he was naked,” Jason said.

Humphrey said nothing, pinching the bridge of his nose and shaking his head.

Not all of the team rode the mantis beetles. Sophie maintaining her scouting glide-flight over their heads, while Humphrey rode Stash in lizard form. Clive joined Sophie, drifting slowly through the air on Onslow, the flying tortoise. His familiar wasn't very fast at any altitude beyond just above ground height, but as he didn't need to navigate the terrain there was no problem keeping up.

That left the three mantis beetles, the most Shade could produce. It was enough for Jason, Neil and Belinda, giving the whole team effective transport. The blade arms of the mounts were ideal for cutting a path through the jungle, while the remaining six beetle legs offered a solid platform that could navigate the uneven ground with ease.

"Shade, how do you think this form would hold up in combat?" Jason asked. Although the mantis beetle looked to have a hard, chitinous exterior, it was actually composed of the same soft, comfortable shadow-stuff Shade's horse form had been. The blade arms were effectively cutting through the undergrowth, however.

"That would be unreliable, at best," Shade said. "I strongly suspect that any amount of damage would make me unable to sustain this form. You do not have to tell anyone that, however. I could be used to make an effective bluff."

"I like the way you think."

"Oh, great," Neil said. "As if Asano wasn't dodgy enough already. Now he's got a partner."

The team reached the interior of the city where the buildings were completely shattered and the jungle in complete ascendance. As with their first visit, they were unharassed by monsters as they pushed in. Rather than ride mounts, they made a slogging path on foot through the thick undergrowth.

"Do you think the blood weaver took control of all the monsters in this area?" Neil asked.

"There might have been some too strong to take over," Humphrey said. "Other silver rank monsters. They were more likely driven out of the weaver's territory, rather than subjugated. You can expect to encounter vampire versions of everything bronze and below that was here, though."

"It kind of worries me that we still aren't seeing any," Neil said.

"It almost certainly knows we're here by now," Clive said. "It's smart enough to try and bait us in, the way it did last time, but not smart enough to realise we'd see through it."

"Yeah, but we're walking into the trap anyway," Neil said.

"Once the fighting starts, it probably won't stop until we reach the blood weaver," Humphrey said. "We're going to be fighting all the monsters from a large area, all in one

wave. Let Jason and Sophie do the heavy lifting as much as possible, since they're our endurance players. Obviously do what you have to, but conserve your mana and stamina as much as you can. We have a lot of mana recovery, but expect a lot of fight."

Humphrey stopped, looking around at the team.

"Make no mistake," he said. "This will be a battle, not a fight. We are about to experience the single most gruelling combat scenario that any of us have ever encountered. More than the expedition into the desert astral space, more than Jason playing distraction to the silver-rank elemental. We're going to war against an army of vampire monsters and we'll be wading through the bodies of the dead before we're done."

"So, what I'm hearing is that it will be easy and we shouldn't worry," Neil said.

Humphrey glared at him and Jason put a reassuring hand on Humphrey's arm.

"Mate, it's alright," Jason said. "We know the stakes, we know what we're up against and we know what we'll have to face before we're done. Don't go wasting your energy now on being tense; you'll have intensity enough, once the fighting starts. For now, just trust in your team."

Jason glanced at the jungle around them, as if waiting for something.

"Damn," he said.

"What?" Humphrey asked.

"That would have been an epic moment for the monsters to appear," Jason. "You'd think vampires would have a more appropriate sense of drama."

Chapter 237

It's Not About Killing Monsters

They heard the monsters before they saw them. It began with the sound of something moving loudly through the thick jungle, pushing its way roughly through the undergrowth. Humphrey had them turn around and go back the way they came, making for one of the defensible points he had been looking out for as they travelled.

He had picked out a construction that had held up better than most, due to being a solid, flat, stone platform. It was only around chest high, far from enough to stop monsters, but was at least an impediment they could work with. It was also sized fairly well for the team, giving Sophie and Humphrey the chance to move about while staying close to the more vulnerable party members.

Shade returned to his normal form, gently depositing his riders on the ground. The others took a moment to begin calling up their summons and familiars while Stash turned from a riding lizard into a giant marsh hydra. At bronze rank he could take the physical form of bronze-rank monsters but could only use the full magical powers of iron-rank monsters. He could use some minor magical abilities of bronze-rank monsters, but certainly nothing as powerful as the hydra's potent rapid healing. What he did get was the hydra's strength, toughness and multiple, teeth-laden heads.

Jason directed Gordon to stay with the main group as the familiar's direct damage would be more useful to the team than it would for Jason in the fight to come. He was about to leave when Humphrey held him up.

"Jason," Humphrey said. "We're going to lean on you heavily for this, but I know you can do it."

Jason chuckled.

"Humphrey," he said, shaking his head, "you still don't really understand adventuring. It's not about killing monsters."

Jason tugged casually at his new, bronze-rank battle robe.

"It's about how you look while you're killing monsters. And you have to admit..."

Jason's shadow cloak manifested around him.

"...I make this look good."

"Dear gods, you're insufferable," Neil called out from where he was setting up a summoning circle. "Also, good luck and please don't die."

Jason slipped the hood of his magical cloak back, giving Humphrey a rare smile completely devoid of smirk.

“Don’t go getting it into your head that you have to do all the work,” Jason warned him. “Don’t go thinking that you’re the one who has to save everyone, to make the big sacrifice. Remember when I got it into my head to go of and kill all those bandits alone? I was wrong to do that. Be the beneficiary of my mistakes. It’s not just about you. Or me, which I need to be reminded of, from time to time.”

“Happy to help!” Neil called out, still pouring the salt for his summoning circle.

“Thank you, Neil,” Jason said flatly, then turned his attention back to Humphrey.

“Trust the team, Humphrey. Rely on the team. We’re pretty good. Well, Neil’s okay. But the rest of us...”

Jason slipped his hood back up and lightly ran off, vanishing into the jungle. He was stronger when he was free to run rampant, but would remain in contact with the team through the voice chat.

There were ropey vines all over the platform and Clive handed Sophie and Belinda vials they used to rapidly wither the plants and give themselves clear footing. It was a concoction of Jory’s that Clive had acquired a supply of before returning to the jungle-covered city. They didn’t have enough for it to waste on pathfinding through jungle scrub, but to give them some much-needed solid footing in a crucial moment it was perfect.

As the two women cleared off the plants, Clive started drawing out ritual circles. He started with a large one in the centre of the platform, his battle platform ritual that would enhance the wand and staff attacks, as well as any damage spells of the group. Then he moved on to circles attached to the end of his weapons. The glowing lines moved with the weapons as he waved them about.

The advantage of staff and wand weapons was that they were highly mana efficient, compared to combat magic. The disadvantage was that they were also weaker, but Clive’s ritual circles would help remedy that.

The circles he was using would refine the ambient magic of the area and feed it into the weapons, providing additional power without requiring additional mana from Clive’s own pool. The impact this would have on the ambient magic once he started using his weapons meant that any further rituals in the area would be tricky to use for a while, but that was hardly a concern with what was about to happen.

Clive decided to get in before then and try something he had been working on. It wasn’t related to his essence abilities, instead being a work of pure ritual magic. Ritual magic designed for combat some exceptionally rare, and it was something Clive had developed himself.

He started drawing ritual circles in the air, one after another in a line, like a tube. He poured large amount of his own mana into each one, largely depleting his mana pool by the time he was done. It ran from the centre of the battle platform circle directly toward the jungle where the sound of rushing monsters was growing louder by the moment.

Humphrey and Neil, in the meantime, were calling up their summons. Neil's chrysalis golem looked different at bronze rank. It was just as tall but the formerly chunky, ogrish form was now more refined, like a powerfully muscled giant.

For his own summon, Humphrey hesitated before throwing the summoner's die. He ultimately decided to use it, knowing that it could provide a crucial advantage in what would be a punishing battle. Hopefully, even a bad role would be mitigated by the new ability it had gained on reaching bronze rank. At first, Humphrey had thought there was no change to the function of the die, as there was little change to the description.

Item: [Summoner's Die: Form] (bronze rank [growth], legendary)

An eldritch tool for altering the nature of summoned creatures (weapon, wand).

- Requirements: Summoning power.
- Effect: Rolling this die while enacting a bronze-rank or lower summoning power will randomly alter the form the summon takes.
- Can be used in conjunction with [Summoner's Die: Element] and [Summoner's Die: power]. Using more than one die of the same kind will negate the effects of all dice.

What he had only later realised was that three of the faces on the die had changed. It had only been the day before when he used the die and one of the new faces rolled up. After stopping, the symbol that lit up was not that of an animal, but one that Clive quickly translated as meaning 'power.' The die had then rolled again, on its own, landing on the symbol for wolf. The result had been Humphrey's summons turning into werewolf like creatures, larger, more powerful and standing on two legs. They were still made of dragon bone and had the conjured equipment generated by Humphrey's storage power, in this case, bronze-rank armour perfectly tailored to fit their unusual body shape.

Humphrey hoped for a similar result as he rolled again. When it stopped, a glowing symbol rose up from the die; another of the new symbols. Humphrey had gone over them with Clive after finding out about the new sides and knew this one meant double. He had been hoping that meant it doubled the number of summons it called up. Even unenhanced by the die, ten of his bone soldiers would be of critical value against the numbers they were expecting.

After falling to a stop, the die rolled itself again, the symbol for bird rising up to float next to the one for double. Then the die rolled for a third time, stopping on cat. The three symbols merged to form a new symbol, one that Humphrey didn't know. Then his summons began to appear.

There were five, the normal number for his summoning power at bronze rank. They had the hind legs and body of oversized lions, and the wings and head of a giant eagle. Their front legs were also those of an eagle, ending in powerful talons.

"Griffins," Humphrey said in a half-whisper. He had seen them as a child, while travelling with his mother. Sailing on a ship near the coast, they had spotted the griffins come soaring majestically off the top of a cliff. They had swooped down, snatching sharks right out of the water before winging away with them.

It had been young Humphrey's first encounter with a magical beast that was natural, rather than a monster. Such creatures were rare in the low-magic Greenstone region where he was born and raised. It had left griffins with a special place in his heart and he was entranced as his summons took their form. These were all white, the colour of dragon bone, and wearing armoured barding suited to their forms.

"Humphrey," Sophie called out. "Eyes up."

Humphrey stirred from his unexpected, nostalgic reverie and realised that the sounds of the approaching monsters had grown from a few individuals crashing through the jungle into what sounded like a wave. Like water crashing onto a rocky shore, the violent sounds of monsters tearing through the undergrowth came washing over them.

Humphrey touched one of the griffins.

"Swoop, grab and drop," he instructed them and they took to the air. He then leapt lightly onto the platform, where Neil and his golem had already clambered up. Most of the team were gathered with their familiars and summons, the exception being Humphrey and Jason. Jason had taken Colin and Shade with him, leaving Gordon behind. Humphrey was present, but his griffon's were winging overhead as Clive's floating tortoise watched their majestic swooping forlornly.

Humphrey had sent Stash, in his domineering hydra form, back behind the platform. The monsters would largely try and swarm them from the front, which is where their main defensive strength was positioned. It was inevitable, though, that the platform would become surrounded. Stash would be their main line of defence from that approach.

Clive and Neil both started casting spells on their teammates. Humphrey grew half his height again from Neil's first offering.

Ability: [Giant's Might] (Growth)

- Spell (boon).
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 10 minutes.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (04%).

- Effect (iron): Target ally and their equipment grow larger, gaining an enhanced [Power] attribute.

- Effect (bronze): Ally also gains resistance to physical damage and high-momentum effects.

Clive's first spell affected the whole team on the platform, including their summons and familiars. Jason, Shade, Colin and the Griffons who were out of range were not so blessed. The ability created rings of glowing runes that floated around everyone.

Ability: [Rune Mantle] (Rune)

- Spell (boon, this ability has variable subtypes, contingent on effect).
- Cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: 10 seconds.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (02%).

- Effect (iron): Bestow a ring of random runes around an ally. Each rune is associated with a specific effect that affects the ally or an enemy. Attacks against the ally trigger the destruction of a random rune, causing its effect to occur.

- Effect (bronze): Increasing the cost to moderate mana allows the rune mantle to be bestowed on all nearby allies.

Clive's second spell likewise affected the whole team, making them glow gold-red for a moment before fading.

Ability: [Mantle of Retribution] (Karmic)

- Spell (boon, retributive).
 - Cost: Low mana.
 - Cooldown: 10 seconds.

 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (01%).

 - Effect (iron): Inflicts retributive impact damage on anyone who attacks the target ally.

 - Effect (bronze): Increasing the cost to moderate mana allows the mantle of retribution to be bestowed on all nearby allies.
-

While the spells were being cast, the monsters grew louder and louder, yet there were no roars or shrieks. They were silent, save for the commotion of their passage through the jungle as they flattened everything in their path.

Finally they appeared in front of the team, erupting out of the jungle. As unnerving as the fact that they weren't issuing any noises was the way the disparate group moved as one. Normally, such a wild collection of monsters would be more eager to fight each other than they would adventurers..

As the creatures reached the platform, they finally started to make noise, all in harmony. It was an alien, sonorous cry, filled with hunger.

"Throw your heaviest attacks to blunt the first wave, then conserve mana," Humphrey called out, as if the team hadn't gone over and over the plans for the battle.

Clive had already made his big mana expenditure on his row of ritual circles. They were lined up like the barrel of a gun and he fired a bolt from his staff through the first. The bolt froze, as if caught in an invisible hand, and the mana Clive had put into the circle was fed into the bolt until the circle collapsed. The bolt shot forward again, stopping and draining mana from each circle until it was a huge globe of force that made the air around the team vibrate.

While the bolt was going through its stop-start passage, the rest of the team opened up. Belinda used her force tether power to gather a large cluster of the shoulder-to-shoulder monsters and then open her reaper pit power underneath. The tether exploded and the rest of their health would be eaten away by the pit. Only a few of the tough bronze-rankers would eventually escape when the pit's duration came to an end.

Clive's bolt finished its passage, having consumed all the ritual circles. It landed amongst the monsters like military ordinance, throwing up a huge cloud of dirt and dust,

along with a low boom that rammed into their eardrums. The cloud obscured most of the monsters from their sight, while gobbets of wet jungle earth and wet former monster rained down on the team. They didn't have time to pay it any mind, as what they could see of the monsters showed that they hadn't slowed down.

"What the hell was that?" Jason asked through voice chat.

"Sorry," Clive said. "I didn't realise the effect would be that big."

"Just watch where you're aiming that thing!"

Chapter 238

Sin Eater

Sophie and Humphrey were waiting for the monsters to get closer, while Neil cast a spell, conjuring two sets of three stone reels above his head. There were pictures of the various monsters present on the reels, like a giant, archaic slot machine. There were also images of the team, although massively out numbered by those of the monsters.

Ability: [Reels of Fortune] (Prosperity)

- Spell (this ability has variable subtypes, contingent on effect).
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 10 minutes.

- Current rank: bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Conjures three immaterial reels. Channel mana into the reels to generate random effects on random individuals within the area. If an individual is affected more than once by the same use of the reels, the effect is increased for each reel.

- Effect (bronze): Conjures a second set of reels. Each reel is more likely to match sets for additional effect when large numbers of a creature type are present.

The reels wheeled around before slowing and locking into place, one after another. Due to the bronze rank effect and preponderance of monsters, it was all but a given that each reel would produce a matching set. The first turned up three matching images of a snake monster and sent a stroke of electricity into the cloud. The team could only see flashes of the lightning through the dirt and dust of the cloud that Clive had thrown up.

The second orb showed a three-set of a gorilla-like monster and sent a huge ball of fire sailing into the air. At the peak of its arc, it broke into numerous, smaller fireballs, plunging into the cloud as the reels above Neil faded. By this point, the monsters were almost upon them.

Humphrey turned his gaze to the sky and teleported high into the air, before initiating his dive bomb and unstoppable force attacks, descending through the air like the sword of judgement. He carved a heavily armoured beetle-type creature clean in half and sent out a shockwave that scattered the surrounding monsters, dispersing the momentum they rebuilt after Clive's attack. Humphrey's wings appeared on his back and with a heavy flap they pushed his back onto the platform.

The first monsters had reached the platform and Sophie used her massive acceleration power, eternal moment. Time seemed to freeze as she rapidly produced wind blades that shot off as the power faded, so many that even the iron-rank attack eliminated a bronze-rank monster.

With everyone having fired off their big openers, Neil cast a spell.

Ability: [Cornucopia] (Prosperity)

- Spell (boon, recovery).
- Cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: 1 hour.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (01%).

- Effect (iron): Bestow a very strong mana and stamina recovery effects on all nearby allies, with a moderate duration.

- Effect (bronze): Provide boons that adapt to the needs of each ally. These effects have a long duration.

The team's mana started rapidly replenishing, and the team received various bonuses. Clive received an increase to wand and staff damage, as did Belinda, who had used her spurious sorcerer power to also gain the power to use magic weapons. Humphrey received a cost reduction for special attacks, while Sophie had her passive damage abilities strengthened. As for Neil, he had his cooldown times reduced. Even the familiars received bonuses, Only Jason missing out by being out of range.

Everything was turning to chaos as monsters piled up around the platform. After Clive's blast gutted the centre mass of the monster wave, it was the flanks that pushed in hardest, with Humphrey and Sophie each holding a side while Neil's golem took the less hectic front. It was higher rank than Sophie, but the tenacious adventurer was still better able to hold the line than the summon.

The monsters were primarily a mix of high-end iron and low-end bronze, with a few powerful standouts among them. The horde spread to the rear of the platform faster than expected after being pushed around the sides. There, they ran into hydra-form Stash, Humphrey directing the griffins to move in and support him.

The monsters started piling up around the platform, held off by Stash, Sophie, Humphrey and the golem. Humphrey was swinging his sword back and forth in workmanlike fashion, his normal blows enough to put paid to the iron-rankers. His special attacks he saved for the bronzes.

Sophie was moving so fast she looked like a flipbook animation, like a series of still images leading one into the other. She made the most of her increased damage buff and battering her foes with a dazzling series of hits that looked more like the speed of a bronze ranker.

Her wind blade power was of limited effect against the strength and number of the enemy. Instead, she relied on her wind wave power that could blast powerful gusts of air and send enemies flying. Usable every six seconds, it was an effective tool for disrupting the enemy and buying time. With the teams mana regeneration and her own efficiency, it was a pattern she could keep up indefinitely.

The others poured out damage from behind, Belinda and Clive with staves, Gordon and Belinda's lantern familiar with beams and bolts of force. Onslow floated above them blasting out powers from his shell. The magically saturated astral space was kind to the rune tortoise, allowing its powers to recharge more swiftly than normal and making it less reliant on Clive's mana.

The ranged attackers mostly focused on Sophie's side and the golem at the front, as Humphrey brought strength and resilience enough to hold a side largely on his own.

An unstable détente was formed, the monsters blindly attacking, but unable to make it past the teams defences for the moment. The initially impassive monsters were increasingly entering a state of blood frenzy, their vampiric natures revealed in a clamouring thirst for the blood of the team.

The powers Clive had placed on the team, the rings of runes and the retributive damage, were proving a highly efficient use of his mana. Their effects weren't great, but they were ongoing and cheaply reapplied. The mantle of retribution inflicted damage back onto enemies, not in huge amounts, but it accumulated as the monsters threw themselves at Humphrey, the golem and Stash, all of whom were taking regular hits.

Each attack also triggered one of the runes from the rune mantle, to wildly varied effect. Some gave the ally a heal over time, an instant burst of mana recovery or bestowed boons like damage reduction, enhanced strength or even more retributive damage.

When the runes affected the attacking enemy they usually blasted out damage that could be of any type. Elemental damage was the most common, but also varieties of force, from the powerful resonating and disruptive types to sonic shockwaves. At other times, the runes applied afflictions, from a weakening poison to flames that wouldn't seem to go out.

One more effect was impinging upon the enemies with every attack they made. It was one that had little immediate effect, but threatened to ultimately determine the fight.

Ability: [Hegemony] (Sin)

- Aura (holy, unholy).
 - Base cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (09%).

 - Effect (iron): Allies within the aura have increased resistance to afflictions, while enemies within the aura have their resistance to afflictions reduced. Enemy resistances are further reduced for each instance of [Sin] they are suffering from.

 - Effect (bronze): Inflicts an instance of [Sin] on enemies that make physical or magical attacks against allies within the aura. Instances applied in this way cannot be resisted.

 - [Sin] (affliction, curse, stacking): All necrotic damage taken is increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

Jason's initial plans had been literally blasted into dust by Clive, forcing him to reorient himself. He and Shade's bodies were shadowy figures moving amongst the monsters, elusive and fleeting presences that monsters had no more than a swipe or two at before they were gone.

His aura was blanketing the area without giving away his position, akin to hiding a tree in the forest. It was one of the first aura techniques Farrah had ever shown him and now it was second nature. He might not be able to hide his aura from a well-trained silver ranker, but even they would have trouble pinpointing his location when he used this technique.

He was staying relatively close to the platform, where his aura could blanket the monsters attacking his team. Every attack earned the monsters an instance of the necrosis-enhancing sin affliction, setting them up for a later fall. Every enemy that struck out against his allies was slowly shovelling earth from their own grave.

Jason himself also took damage. Even without his aura revealing his presence, simply weaving through the monsters meant that many were taking swipes at him as he passed. They were a small price to pay for the havoc he was wreaking in return.

For the bronze rankers he was lashing out with his dagger, piling on afflictions with every sweeping slice. In his other hand was a bronze rank weapon he had stowed away in his inventory since looting it from the marsh hydra he had fought with Humphrey and Clive.

Item: [Flail of the Hydra] (bronze rank, rare)

A whip imbued with the life-force of a hydra (weapon, whip).

- **Effect:** The whip does not function like a normal whip. When swung, the heads of the whip will seek out enemies to attack.
 - **Effect:** Poison inflicted using the whip as a medium is more potent.
-

The whip had five thick, thick, brown, leathery tails that ended in bulbs, within which were mouths filled with wickedly sharp teeth. They flailed uncontrollably, springing eagerly at any flesh that wasn't attached to the arm holding it. As Jason could use two shadow arms now, he had one for flexibility with the dagger and one to add reach to the whip.

The disadvantage of the whip was that it didn't inflict the trio of afflictions the conjured dagger produced, which is why Jason used that for the tougher monsters. It still applied the disease added by his shadow arm power and the effect of any special attack he used.

Most importantly, those effects were delivered by each of the five heads. That meant a single target special attack could now affect five at a time, albeit randomly in whatever vague direction the whip was swung. In a thick crowd of monsters, it was an excellent tool for thinning out the weaker ones. The whip's bites might have not dealt a lot of damage, but as an affliction delivery system it was amazing.

Jason was unconcerned about the damage being inflicted on him, in spite of being amidst a sea of monsters. Pain was an old friend to any adventurer that truly threw themselves into the work, and his powers gave him powerful advantages over the vampiric enemy. His blood abilities were especially potent against the vampiric creatures and the blood magic that fuelled them. As he lay into them with his dagger, that made his choice of special attack obvious.

Ability: [Leech Bite] (Blood)

- **Special attack** (wounding, blood, drain, poison).
- **Base cost:** Low stamina.
- **Cooldown:** None.

- **Current rank:** Bronze 0 (07%).

- **Effect (iron):** Inflicts or refreshes the [Bleeding] condition. Drains a small amount of health and stamina when refreshing the [Bleeding] condition.

- **Effect (bronze):** Inflicts an instance of [Leech Toxin].

- **[Bleeding]** (affliction, wounding, blood): Deals ongoing damage by causing or increasing blood loss. As a wounding effect, this condition absorbs and negates an amount of incoming healing, after which this affliction immediately ends.

- [Leech Toxin] (affliction, poison, blood, stacking): When [Bleeding] is negated, an instance of [Leech Toxin] on the target is consumed to reapply [Bleeding]. Additional instances can be accumulated.
-

Against the vampiric monsters both the bleeding effect and the health drain were operating more powerfully than normal, even accounting for the increase to bronze rank. The health drain helped keep him going, although alone, it was not enough to outpace the regular swipes and bites that he suffered. Fortunately, he was able to devour the very means the vampires sought to bring him down with. Every bite he suffered only made him stronger as his sin eater ability devoured the curses they carried.

- You have been afflicted with [Vampiric Blood Curse].
 - [Vampiric Blood Curse] (affliction, poison, blood, stacking): Has a slight disorienting effect that increases with stacks. Beyond a certain threshold, dying under this effect will cause you to rise as a vampiric ghoul.
 - You have resisted [Vampiric Blood Curse].
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
 - You have gained an instance of [Integrity].
-

For Jason, the vampiric powers of their enemies were not an issue. He had some concerns about his team, but they were holding it off to a degree. Sophie and Jason's auras protected them, and Neil was on hand to cleanse if necessary. The plan was to leave that to Jason, though, who not only didn't spend mana to cleanse, but got it back in return.

Jason's sin eater ability already increased his resistances, and increased them even further for each effect he resisted. At bronze rank, each effect resisted also bestowed a new boon, alongside each instance of the resistance boon.

- [Integrity] (heal-over-time, mana-over-time, stamina-over-time, holy, stacking): Periodically recover a small amount of health, stamina and mana. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

The effect of a single instance was very mild, but with every bite he suffered, the healing continued to stack up. On top of this, he also had his protective amulet.

Item: [Amulet of the Dark Guardian] (growth, bronze rank, legendary)

- Effect: For each instance of an affliction applied to an enemy, gain an instance of [Guardian's Blessing]. You may bestow all instances of [Guardian's Blessing] upon another person by touch.
 - [Guardian's Blessing] (boon, holy): Instances are consumed to absorb damage from any source. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. For each instance consumed, gain an instance of [Blessing's Bounty].
 - [Blessing's Bounty] (heal-over-time, holy, stacking): Heal over time. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

As he laid out afflictions, he gained stacks of protection that were consumed as fast as they were laid on, leaving a heal effect in their wake. Between the two healing effects and the drain, Jason was healing much of the damage monsters landed on him with their opportunistic strikes.

He constantly flickered around using Shade's bodies to stay on the move. He never stopped long enough in any particular location for the monsters around him to stop and make concerted attacks. That kind of focus when surrounded would easily be enough to overwhelm him in short order.

Even staying on the move, he was taking damage faster than he was healing it. That, and the slowly accruing vampiric curse affecting the team made it time for a return to the platform. He sent one of Shade's bodies ahead, allowing him to step through another and right into the middle of his team.

Chapter 239

The Most Dangerous Thing in the Dark

Behind his front-line team members, Jason injuries swiftly started healing over. The recovery power he gained from devouring vampiric curses combined with the healing Colin provided to close his wounds without requiring intervention from Neil. In most cases, his armour had mitigated the bulk of the damage, so here were no individual injuries that were egregious.

Jason did not immediately turn his attention to the team. First, he looked out at the amassing monsters, picking out the sturdier bronze-rank one. His eyes sought out those who were affected by his afflictions but tough enough that they were still far from being overcome. He cast inexorable doom on them, one after the other, to start churning out the automatic afflictions that would stack his amulet.

Ability: [Inexorable Doom] (Doom)

- Spell (curse)
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (09%).

- Effect (iron): Periodically applies an additional instance of each stacking curse, disease, poison or unholy affliction the target is suffering from. This is a curse effect. This effect cannot be cleansed while any other curse or any disease, poison or unholy affliction is in effect.

- Effect (bronze): Inflicts or refreshes the [Inescapable] affliction.

- [Inescapable] (affliction, magic): Subject cannot be affected by teleport or non-damaging dimension effects.

With his afflictions ticking up, Jason turned his attention to the team. Sophie was relatively undamaged, the advantage of being an evasive-type defender. Holding out against numbers was not her strong suit, however, and her own armour was marked with the rents of bite and claw. Jason used his feast of absolution power to absorb the vampiric blood curse from her and stack his own healing in the process.

The others holding the line were Humphrey, Neil's golem and Stash, guarding their rear from behind the platform at the back. He was still in the shape of the massive hydra from which Jason had looted his whip.

The golem was immune to the vampire's curse and didn't require Jason's attention. It had suffered enough damage to be forced into its chrysalis state, but that was not enough to let the enemy past the now bronze-rank summon. The crystalline cocoon was no longer the inert mass it had been in the past. It was now a rune-covered obelisk of crystal, rapid-firing crystal spikes into the crowd. Anything that got close was struck by crystal spears, that shot out to strike a target, then remained bristling from the obelisk like diamond pikes. Given the mass of monsters trying to push past, it had swiftly transitioned from obelisk to tall, diamond echidna, covered in bloody spines. The chrysalis stage, as it turned out, was proving a better blocker than the golem had before entering it.

Humphrey was standing strong against the horde, his strength and fortitude an impassable bulwark as his sword threshed the monsters before him like an apocalyptic farming implement. His armour was much stronger than Sophie's but he had, nonetheless, suffered injuries as he put himself fearless forward. Neil's healing was on top of the injuries, but he had left the afflictions for Jason to drink up, which he did.

That left Stash, who was faring the worst of all, being off the platform and essentially holding the rear alone. Neil had been helping, but the lack of the hydra's regenerative powers was obvious, and the large size of the hydra form made it easy to swarm. Jason drained the afflictions from Stash, then called out to him.

"I'm coming in, Stash!"

Stash stilled his body for a moment, not that the hydra form was agile. Jason jumped directly onto his back, behind the five, long hydra necks, and slapped a hand onto one of them.

-
- You have bestowed all instances of [Guardian's Blessing] to a party member's familiar, [Velitraxistaasch].
-

Jason made use of his bronze rank agility, the equal of any circus acrobat, and back-flipped off Stash and back to the platform. His cloak didn't entangle him as he could make it incorporeal at will and have it drift right through his body to settle, shrouding his flipping form in shadow.

"Is anyone recording this fight?" he asked.

"We're a little busy, Jason," Clive admonished.

"Right, yep."

Jason cast a gaze over the situation around Stash. The multi-headed hydra form was good at picking off the weaker monsters quickly and Humphrey's familiars were also working that rear side of the battle. They likewise went for the weaker ones, flying in and

snatching them in their talons before carrying them into the air. While their griffin forms were powerful and their dragon-bone bodies not subject to vampiric powers, they did not risk alighting amongst the massing horde. They would peck the monster to death in the air, or carry them high enough that the subsequent drop did the job.

As a result, there was a growing percentage of bronze-rank and tougher iron-rank monsters surrounding Stash, increasingly putting him under pressure. Jason began his intervention, throwing out quick spells at the monsters that presented the biggest threats. He didn't have a lot of afflictions on them yet, but he started with inexorable doom in preparation and followed up with a blood spell.

Ability: [Haemorrhage] (Blood)

- Spell (wounding, unholy, blood)
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (06%).

- Effect (iron): Inflicts or refreshes the [Bleeding] and [Sacrificial Victim] afflictions.

- Effect (bronze): Inflicts the [Necrotoxin] affliction.

- [Bleeding] (affliction, wounding, blood): Deals ongoing damage by causing or increasing blood loss. As a wounding effect, this condition absorbs and negates an amount of incoming healing, after which this affliction immediately ends.

- [Sacrificial Victim] (affliction, unholy): Any drain attacks or blood afflictions suffered have increased effect.

- [Necrotoxin] (affliction, poison, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until poison is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

He went through the strongest enemies, dropping the two-spell combination on each. When he was happy with his coverage, he leapt into the fray once more, wading through the monsters to support Stash. He went after the monsters he had thrown spells on, one to the next. He would hit each of them just once, laying on afflictions with his dagger before moving on. His whip he continued to thrash in the direction of the weaker enemies, using it to make space as best he could in the press of monsters.

By the time he was done, so many afflictions were ticking over that his amulet accrued blessings faster than the hits he was taking could consume them. On his way

back to the platform, he once again bestowed them on Stash. They would only last so long, but it was a respite for Neil's healing that was welcome in the endurance battle.

Back on the platform, Jason turned back to look at the monsters held back by Stash's massive hydra body and five snapping heads. He looked for one of the tougher, now heavy afflicted monsters and cast a spell. Instead of his usual finishers, punishment or verdict, he hit it with something different.

Ability: [Feast of Blood] (Blood)

- Spell (drain, blood)
- Base Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (03%).

- Effect (iron): Drain health and stamina. Only affects targets with bleeding wounds or who are suffering from the [Bleeding] affliction.

- Effect (bronze): Drains additional health and stamina for each instance of poison on the target.

Of all Jason's abilities, bar one, feast of blood had proven the most powerful against vampires, feeding on the blood magic coursing through them. After ranking up it grew stronger from every stance of poison on the target and Jason could layer quite a number of poisons. Necrotoxin, leech toxin, the ruination of the blood from his dagger and the umbral snake venom from his new armour, all stackable and piling up under the effects of inexorable doom. The result, amplified by the vampiric vulnerability to blood magic, made the first monster wither and die, its empty husk falling to the ground.

Even his transcendent damage finisher was not as strong against the vampiric monsters. While he waited for the cooldown, he threw out more spells, turning his attention to Sophie's side of the platform. Still an iron-ranker, she was fearlessly punching above her weight, but while she had not been in as much danger as Stash, hers was the side closest to being pushed in. Jason continued throwing out spells on her side, in between using feast of blood as a finisher on Stash's.

Jason glanced over the rest of the field. Humphrey was holding the most steady. Neil's growth spell had worn off, but Humphrey remained a powerhouse, stronger and tougher than any other member of the team. Jason asked Neil about Humphrey's mana consumption.

"He's doing great," Neil said. "Very controlled; we've barely had to top him off."

Despite the deadly, blood-soaked porcupine, monsters were starting to accumulate on the golem's side. Jason was about to intervene when the golem erupted from its chrysalis. This time, it had taken the form of three plain, crystal blocks, each seeming comical and harmless as they stood on three legs apiece. It became less funny as they waddled into place to form a wall, each proving to possess the same spike power as the chrysalis form. Soon, all three were bristling with bloody spines.

Jason turned his attention back to Stash, firing off another feast of blood spell before bestowing a third stack of blessings on the familiar. Many of the toughest enemies were now cleared off and Stash and the griffins could handle the rest for the moment.

Jason returned to Sophie's side, where she fought, uncomplaining, even as her injuries and the pressure upon her mounted. Jason stepped forward and held up his hand to unleash his strongest trump card, the power that was unequivocally his strongest against the vampire monsters. Blood seeped out of his palm and then leeches started erupting from his hand. He swept his arm like a water cannon at a riot, scattering his swarm familiar over the crowd of monsters.

Colin was a vampire-devouring machine and that whole side of the battle collapsed like wilting flowers. Jason had considered unleashing Colin from the start, but had decided that holding him for when he was needed most would be the most effective use. The monsters had largely recovered from the team's initial big hits and were ramping up the pressure, so it seemed like the moment was right to deploy his strongest weapon.

"I'll cover you," Jason said after draining Sophie's afflictions again. "Take a rest."

While the front-liners had been bearing the brunt of the attacks, Clive and Belinda had been dishing out the damage, like Jason. Using her specious sorcerer power, Belinda gained the ability to use wands and staves like Clive. Even though she could take advantage of his battle platform ritual and he had also put enhancement rituals on her weapons, she was still a pale comparison. He was a rank higher, as were his legendary items.

Both Belinda and Clive had been using their rune trap powers on cooldown. It was a little costly on mana, but so long as they otherwise stuck to their weapons it was sustainable. The value of the spells, even Belinda's iron-rank version, was incredible. The monsters were too packed together to move out of the way, pushing each other into maximising the effectiveness of the small explosive area.

Sophie resumed her position and Jason once again dove into the mess of monsters, roaming about, laying afflictions. Through the voice chat, Clive warned them of a new threat.

“Flying monsters,” he announced. “I think they’re night shrikes.”

The team looked up the approaching creatures, winging their way over the jungle canopy and into their air above their clearing. Night shrikes were another monster they had encountered before. Their bodies were the size of a small, slender person, something between a bat and a hook-billed bird. They were bronze-rank, but very much on the weak side, physically. Their advantages lay in their flight and their special power, which they combined to make hit and run attacks with their sharp beaks.

Floating above the team, Onslow turned his head to the new enemy, but Clive directed him to stay focused on the ground monsters.

“Jason will handle them,” Clive told his familiar.

As monster ranks increased, so did the likelihood of monsters with exotic powers. In the case of the night shrike, they had the ability to plunge an area into magical darkness that even drained the magic from glow stones, although none were out for this daylight battle. The shrikes would then strike using the darkness as their weapon, as their own senses were unimpeded by it.

As anticipated, the shrikes blanketed the platform in complete darkness, turning bright day into deeper than night. What the flying monsters would quickly discover, as had those of their kind who came before, was that they were not the most dangerous thing in the dark.

Jason was no more impeded by the absence of light than the shrikes. Stars lit up on his cloak, shedding light that penetrated the magical power of the shrikes. The motes of light floated off his cloak, leaving it void black, as they floated up and around the platform. They concentrated on the platform itself, giving the team all the light they needed to keep fighting.

Around the platform, the motes of light were softer and spread out, giving just enough illumination to turn the black void of darkness into shadowy gloom. By turning the monsters’ realm of absolute darkness into a realm of shadows, Jason made their kingdom his own.

In a zone of ubiquitous shadow, Jason could teleport around as he wished. He shadow-jumped behind one of the shrikes, wrapping his legs around its, under its wings, and one arm around its neck. The weight reducing power of his cloak stopped them from immediately plunging out of the sky, but the creature’s flight was drastically impeded and they started arcing sharply down. Jason ignored their predicament, ramming his dagger into the monster multiple times before jumping again.

Jason proved a horrifying nemesis to the shrikes, jumping from one to the other and sending them crashing into their monster brethren below. Some were already dead when they hit the ground, the rest soon after from the hard landing and Jason's afflictions.

The shrikes scattered, wings beating heavily as they climbed skyward. It didn't matter. The cover of darkness was vanishing in patches as the shrikes died in rapid succession, restoring the bright sunlight to dominance. When the final shrike died in the air, Jason found himself floating alone in the sky.

Using the new gliding power of his cloak, Jason drifted his way over the team. Cloak fluttering around him, he alighted gently amongst them.

"Alright," Neil acknowledged. "You might kind of make this look good."

"What do you think?" Humphrey asked Neil, refocusing his attention. "Is it time?"

"There's a lot of Jason's sin affliction around now," Neil said. "Yeah, I think it's time. Everyone dump your mana."

The team started unleashing every high cost ability they had, rapidly draining their mana pools much as they had at the beginning of the battle. Colin gathered up during that time, strips of bloody cloth snaking through the battlefield to collect leeches like fly paper and drag them into a central mass that wrapped up into its humanoid form.

"Here we go," Neil said, and activated his power, sending the team, plus their summons and familiars into a dimensional space.

Ability: [Reaper's Redoubt] (Shield)

- Special ability (dimension, recovery, disease).
 - Cost: Extreme mana.
 - Cooldown: 6 hours.

 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (01%).

 - Effect (iron): Take allies into a dimensional space briefly while flooding the area with death energy, dealing disruptive-force damage, necrotic damage and inflicting [Creeping Death] on everything in the area.

 - Effect (bronze): Allies undergo extreme mana replenishment while in the dimensional space.

 - [Creeping Death] (damage-over-time, disease, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until the disease is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

The team emerged from the dimensional space with their mana replenished. The jungle around them had been withered by Neil's power and most of the monsters were dead. Only a handful lingered past what was now the jungle line, having been outside the power's range.

They were about to move on them when eight figures emerged from the jungle. Unlike the monsters, these were all human. They stepped forward slowly, with none of the rush that the monsters had.

"That's them," Humphrey said, face turned steely. "Time to do what we came here for."

Chapter 240

The Boss Comes to Town

Humphrey swung his arms inward, brutally clapping his hands into either side of the cultist vampire's head. It relinquished its bite on Neil's neck, rearing back to let out an alien screech from its inhuman mouth. His jaw unhinged in macabre mockery of the formerly human anatomy. The mouth no longer had teeth, just bare gums and a pair of hairy barbs, growing awkwardly out from the roof of the mouth. They bristled, wet with saliva and Neil's blood.

Humphrey, gripped the vampire by the hair and smashed its head into the stone platform until the body stopped squirming. It was the last of the bizarrely warped adventurers turned inhuman minion.

"I think I got a big dose of that blood curse," Neil said, sounding woozy. He cast a spell on himself.

"Imbue with life."

Clear green light glow around his hand, then shot into his neck.

Ability: [Life Bolt] (Renewal)

- Spell (healing)
- Cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (11%).

- Effect (iron): Delivers life energy through a projectile, giving a small burst of instantaneous healing. Damages certain targets that are inimical to life force, such as most forms of undead.

- Effect (bronze): Bestows a mild, ongoing healing effect.

It was Neil's bread and butter healing spell, which could also be used as a weapon against most forms of undead. He had never actually used it for that, with undead being rare in Greenstone because of the life energy flowing down the Mistrun River. Vampires were no better, with the blood magic flooding their bodies that produced a warped facsimile of life. They were the one form of undead for whom, healing magic was fully effective.

"Give me a second and I'll clear that curse, Neil," Jason said. "I'm a little tied up, right now."

He was stuck to the platform by a blanket of sticky webbing. Gordon was cutting him loose with his four force beams.

“My new armour is definitely a step up,” Jason said as he waited. “That resistance to adhesive effects on the old one would have been handy, though.”

“It was,” Sophie said. She was still using iron-rank armour made primarily, as Jason’s had been, of trap weaver leather. “They were spraying that webbing everywhere, like giant nets. I couldn’t dodge it all.”

“Clive,” Belinda said. “You told us they would be easier to fight after being turned into vampires.”

“And he was right,” Humphrey said. “A few strange spider powers are no compensation for a full suite of bronze-rank abilities.”

“Their transformation was more extreme than I anticipated,” Clive acknowledged. “From what I’ve read about blood weavers, they almost always leave intelligent victims largely intact. They recognise that a high-intelligence minion is worth more than another physically powerful blood puppet.”

“I’m not sure high-intelligence was an issue,” Neil said. “They joined a cult and agreed to come here.”

“Fair point,” Clive conceded. “Blood weavers can put essence users through a stronger transformation, as we saw here, but it destroys the mind. You saw the animalistic way they fought.”

After creepily staring at them from the jungle line, the vampire cultists had recklessly hurled themselves into the team. Their reckless attacks led to the team putting them down in short order, although not before they penetrated the team’s backline. Clive had displayed some unexpectedly solid staff fighting, combining strikes and blocks with blasts of magic. Belinda had used an escape ability but Neil had been latched onto.

Gordon finished cutting Jason free and he immediately started purging the team of afflictions, starting with Neil.

“That was some good work with the staff,” Sophie told Clive. “You’ve been practising with Humphrey?”

“I have,” Clive said. “He told me that I needed to train for the fight I don’t want, along with the one I do. It would appear he was right.”

“Is it just me,” Jason asked, “or was that a bit anti-climactic, after all this time. We came here after the cultists and they turn out to be just more monsters. I mean, after the whole vampire monster army thing, they were just a few more vampires.”

“They seemed more than threatening enough to me,” Neil said, then hit himself with another life bolt spell.

“I’m sorry they got past me,” Sophie apologised to Neil.

“As am I,” Humphrey said. “I don’t think anyone expected that suicide rush. Jason was right, I think. After all the build up, the cultists didn’t amount to much.”

“We need to find where they were staying,” Clive said. “My guess would be somewhere in the centre of the city, past the thickest jungle. That’s probably where the blood weaver found them.”

“So that’s where we’ll probably find it,” Belinda said.

“It could be,” Clive said. “I think it might have run, though. I suspect it realised that we’re strong enough to kill it and threw minions at us to buy time. It probably chose a handful that were strong and mobile and abandoned the area with them while we were chewing through the fodder.”

“We’ll take a break,” Humphrey said. “Then we’ll loot the monsters, burn the cultists and get on to the middle of the city. We’ll find where the cultists were staying before the blood weaver came along and then, what they were up to.”

“That was a huge haul,” Neil said. “Three blood essences and a dark essence. If we find a mouth essence somewhere, we can recreate Jason’s combination.”

They were discussing the loot as they made their way through the still-deserted jungle. Every monster for a wide area had either been taken over by the blood weaver and killed by the team or fled to avoid that fate. They were doubling up on Shade’s three mantis beetle forms, which excelled at cutting a path through the thick scrub. Humphrey with Jason, Neil with Clive and Sophie with Belinda.

“That’s not very mature, Neil,” Jason said. “You shouldn’t make fun of people like that. It’s why people like me more than you.”

“No, that’s because you always bring sandwiches,” Sophie said.

“Sandwiches,” Jason said haughtily, “are the garnish on a prime slab of perfectly pan-seared rakish charm.”

“Getting that myriad essence was the big winner,” Clive said. “A legendary essence, and one of the better ones. We could buy the materials to rank every familiar on the team to silver and still have money left over.”

“I’ll be happy to get mine to bronze,” Belinda said. “I’d also like to get closer to them. How do you do it, Jason? You get along so well with your familiars, but mine are so alien.”

“Colin and Gordon aren’t exactly everyday folk, either,” Jason said.

“Then what’s the secret?” Belinda asked.

“They’re just people,” Jason said. “Treat them that way. Yes, they’re a little odd to our sensibilities, but if it can think, it’s a person. That’s the same, whether you’re talking about a familiar or a god. Even a monster, although that’s a tragic one. Imagine coming into being knowing that you have a terminal condition, and your options are get killed by an adventurer or go insane, kill a bunch of people yourself and die.”

“Gods aren’t people,” Humphrey said.

“That’s a bit rude,” Jason said. “You’ll have to atone for that one.”

“Gods are above people,” Humphrey said.

“There is no above people, Humphrey. There’s just people. Give them enough power and they get a bit weird, but still people.”

“You seem very confident for someone who didn’t believe in gods a year ago,” Humphrey said.

“But I believed in people. It just turns out that some of them are magic. Like us.”

“You do realise that people have different stations in life, right?” Neil asked. “A king is not the same as a pauper.”

“Of course not,” Jason said. “The king inherits a hat and a chair, where the pauper’s lucky to get the hat. Better hat, though. What kind of idiot thinks a metal hat with no top is a great idea. The same guy who thinks monarchy makes sense, I guess.”

“How can you possibly think that gods are just people?” Neil asked. “You think you can just stand before a god and start mouthing off? I’ve been in the presence of gods. Just being near them was like standing under a waterfall.”

“From what I’ve heard, he did exactly that,” Clive said. “I talked to a lot of people after the last excursion into this astral space. A lot of them were talking about the gods showing up and the lunatic talking to them like they were random people off the street.”

“They are random people,” Jason said. “A bit showy, but nice enough. They like to make something of a spectacle of themselves, though.”

The group all turned to stare at Jason. Humphrey had to crane his neck from where he was sitting in front of Jason on the mantis beetle to do it.

“What?” Jason asked.

They passed through the rest of the thick jungle without being accosted by monsters. If any were around, they were apparently smart enough to stay well clear of the ones responsible for getting rid of the rest. The shattered and scattered ruins, buried in jungle,

gave way to fully intact buildings in startlingly short order. The line of demarcation was so stark that it reminded Jason of the Vane estate, where the lush gardens met the desert.

The team made a direct path for the very centre of the city and the large square containing the Order of the Reaper's trial tower. As they moved through the buildings, they started to notice fragments of unusual magic.

"Everyone else is sensing that, right?" Belinda asked.

"Yes."

"Yep."

"Yeah."

"I am."

"Gods damned magic," Sophie muttered. "No."

The team arrested their progress to investigate. The magic was weak enough that it was a curiosity, rather than a threat. It was chaotic, patchy and feeble. They found a fragment of sheared steel, jammed into a brick wall by some tremendous force. Clive took out some tools and began examining it.

"I should look at more," he said as he finished up. At his direction, the team sought out locations from which the strange, scattered magic was emanating. One was a cushion that had somehow buried itself in a wall as forcefully as the metal shard had. Another was a round indentation containing a dark, crystalline powder. After examining the powder for some time, Clive rubbed some between his fingers.

"This is a ground-down awakening stone," he said.

"I didn't realise you could do that," Humphrey said.

"You can't," Clive said. "Every attempt to alter the form an awakening stone has either done nothing or triggered it into returning to a raw magic state. Rainbow smoke."

"This is the result of the Reaper's power," Shade said. "I can sense it because it is the same as my own power."

"You know what happened here?" Clive asked.

"I suspect these fragments are the remnants of the tower's treasure stores. I have previously postulated that the dimensional spaces in which those stores were kept would collapse once the trials came to an end and the power controlling them was withdrawn. My guess would be a mana implosion affected by the protective measures put in place by the order triggered an unexpectedly destructive reaction. There is likely less treasure to find than I originally intimated."

"I think he's right," Clive said. "The traces of astral magic on everything I've looked at are chaotic and unengineered. These fragments don't do anything except throw off some

residual magic. It speaks more to uncontrolled phenomena, like a dimensional explosion.”

“Is this residual magic a threat to us?” Humphrey asked. “It’s weak here, but will there be more dangerous patches?”

“It’s a conglomeration of random dimensional energies,” Clive said, “blasted into a chaotic mess and mixed with the power of a being who could, if it wanted, use that power to assassinate the universe. So... maybe.”

“I think we should give Clive some space,” Jason said. “Leave him to figure things out without having to answer any questions.”

Clive flashed Jason a grateful look as Jason waved the rest of the team away.

“This will be the final ascension ceremony,” Zato told Dougall. “The last of your essence abilities will be gone, but you will cross the threshold of silver-rank today. You can anticipate being filled with something new and far greater.”

“Thank you, Master Zato,” Dougall said. “I know I came to the cult under slightly different circumstances than most, but I am profoundly grateful.”

They were walking through the grounds of the ruined Vane estate, entering what had once been a small wood but now was nothing but dead and withered trees. They reached a space where five equidistant trees stood at the points of a pentagram, part of a magical diagram laid out between them with bricks. The trees could barely be called that anymore, stripped of their branches and bark and sculpted into wooden obelisks. Runes ran down their sides, alternately made from hammered-in steel or engraved directly into the wood and stained the rusty colour of dried blood.

“This is the place,” Zato said. Timos had been waiting for them, head hidden within a voluminous ritual robe. He held out robes for Zato and Dougall. Zato gave Dougall an encouraging smile as they slipped them on.

The ritual took place with Dougall in the middle of the circle, Zato and Timos on opposite sides. On the robes of all three men, magical sigils lit up with power. There was a gathering of energy as the pair conducted an extended chant. Soon, Dougall felt a power rising up from within. The power surged through him, cleansing and changing. He crossed the threshold into silver and impurities started seeping through his pores, leaving him covered in filth. He was panting and tired, but grinning fiercely as he revelled in the sense of power.

Timos stepped forward with a bottle of crystal wash, ignoring the smell. Dougall stripped off the robes and ruined clothes before cleaning himself off, the filth on his skin

and the fallen-out hair sloughing away. Afterwards, Timos lead him to where he had fresh clothes folded neatly in a bag.

As Dougall changed, he revelled in the sensation of his new power. He could no longer sense his essences, but compared to the power he could feel it was no loss. He could even feel more potential power, hidden deep within his soul. It was laying untapped, right next to the... star seed.

He was gripped by a sudden sense of dread; the realisation that the power inside him did not belong to him a all.

As if it were germinating, he felt power swell out from the star seed. It kept coming and coming; an alien might flooding out of his own soul to fill the channels of power that months of ritual treatments had installed in his body. He went cold with fear and an absolute certainty that his soul was no longer his own.

Dougall's last free thought was rage at Zato for his betrayal. He opened his mouth to yell but was choked off as the new power initiated a new, sweeping change. Flesh rippled, but not with organic fluidity. It was like his flesh was comprised of tiny, tiny blocks, undergoing some kind of shift. The strange rippling swept his whole body before settling again, leave no lingering indication of a body anything but organic.

His body went limp, standing like a puppet hanging loose from a string. Dougall stood up straight, his expression was blank, his eyes plain, grey orbs. He looked at the clothes half put-on and finished dressing. Zato and Timos kneeled to the ground, heads bowed, as Dougall finished and looked over his body.

"Lord Builder," Zato greeted, not looking up.

"This vessel is adequate," the Builder, now occupying Dougall's body said. "If I use more than silver-rank power it will break down immediately, but the vessel was prepared efficiently. With care, it will last some time.

"The next vessel is already at a late stage of preparation, Lord Builder," Zato said.

"I know," the Builder said. "I am in your soul. There is nothing you can hide from me."

"No, Lord Builder."

The Builder walked over to where Zato was kneeling, head down.

"There have been a cavalcade of failures here," the builder said. "You made the correct choice in continuing the work, but you made it out of fear. Fear of the consequences of failure."

"We did, Lord Builder," Zato admitted.

The Builder was silent for a long time. Zato could see from his feet that he hadn't moved. Timos couldn't see him at all, not daring to raise his eyes.

“Your motivations are acceptable,” the Builder said finally. “The consequences of failure are there to spur desirable behaviour, after all, which is what they have done. Stand, both of you.”

The cultists stood, but kept their eyes lowered.

“I know all that has transpired,” the Builder said. “I am impressed with how the pair of you have handled dire circumstances placed upon you by the failures of others. Continuing the work instead of drawing back and regrouping was the right choice. Preparing a vessel that I might direct you now, instead of waiting for a success to buffer the failures here was likewise a correct choice. The intrusion of this astral space is more crucial than you realise.”

“Lord Builder?”

“You had not yet been made privy to the true purpose of the astral space we are about to claim. It is one of a small number on this world that are more important than the others. The original intention was for a clockwork king to lead this expedition. In the wake of the failed summoning, the leadership here made a sequence of costly mistakes. This included raising our profile to the point that I was no longer able to move significant resources here without alerting the natives to the importance of the task now ahead of you.”

“We will do what we can with what we have, Lord Builder,” Zato said.

“As you have been doing. I am satisfied that you have both risen to the stations thrust upon you by the inadequacies of those the led before you.”

“Thank you, Lord Builder,” both men said.

“This astral space was something taken from me in the past,” the builder said. “The time has come to reclaim it. There are tools within that will greatly assist our work on this world.”

“What would you have us do, Lord Builder?” Zato asked.

“For now, continue as you have been. First, we enter the astral space. Then we prepare to bring my world engineers here. Your remaining ritualists are mediocre, but under my direction they will be sufficient. Opening those gates will be wildly destructive, but you knew this.”

“Yes, Lord Builder,” Zato said. “I was told that claiming the astral space would be unusually destructive, but not why.”

“It is hard to interrogate our people, but not impossible,” the Builder said. “For this reason, the secret was restricted to the leadership. You will understand the full purpose soon enough.”

“Thank you, Lord Builder. As you obviously know, the Rejector is already in the astral space. Once we are there, I will see to it that the Rejector is found and killed, should he still be alive on our arrival.”

“No,” the Builder said. “The Rejector and I have unfinished business. You will bring him to me alive.”

Chapter 241

It's Very Complicated and You All Need to Go Away

The five storey mass of webbing was stretched between two buildings, completely blocking the street.

"I think I've spotted the blood weaver's nest," Neil said.

"Good eyes," Sophie said. "Maybe you should be the one scouting."

"It's a gift," Neil said.

"Has anyone else noticed Neil starting to take on some of Jason's more immodest traits?" Humphrey asked, leaving everyone laughing but for an affronted Jason and an aghast Neil.

"You really think our friendly neighbourhood spider monster's done a runner?" Jason asked Clive.

"This place is desolate, now," Clive said. "It could be baiting us in again, but into what? If it had something that could take us down, it wouldn't have wasted its army. The creature itself is silver rank, but the main source of its power is the minions it creates. It's fairly fast and fairly strong. It can use webs, obviously, and heals rapidly, especially if it has minions to feed on. Actually fighting it, though? Worlds apart from the elemental tyrant we saw in the waterfall village."

"The danger of blood weavers is their minions and the fact that failing to take one down means joining them," Humphrey said. "We've dealt with the main threat already."

"Exactly," Clive said. "Once the minions are dealt with, a decent bronze rank team should have little problem. The things you have to watch for are the healing and the webs. For the webs, you just have to be careful. For the healing, you need to stop it from feeding and be able to pile on enough damage."

"If that thing is in there," Humphrey said, "we'll be ready. Neil, you're our first line of defence against the webs; hold your shields for anyone with a web coming their way. As for putting on damage and taking off healing, Jason will be doing both. The rest of us are there to give them an easier job, and cut loose anyone who does get webbed up."

"Are we actually going in there?" Belinda asked.

"We are," Humphrey said.

"Won't it be all sticky?" Sophie asked.

"No," Clive said. "Spider monsters who make webs like this can produce two kinds of silk. One is a tool and a weapon. It's sticky and dangerous, but only lasts a short time. Remember the remnants we first found in the jungle. It had degraded relatively quickly,

which is no way to make a home. The other stuff is stronger and most resistant to the elements. It's also hard to build structures from a sticky substance. A nest like this is literally woven from silk. It's why many monsters who make nests like this are called weavers."

The nest turned out to be a network of tunnels that were quite wide, to accommodate the blood weaver itself, which was quite large. It meant the team didn't feel constricted as they worked their way up through the spiral tunnels that ascended throughout. The tunnels led them to chambers, some of which were unclear as to purpose, while others were unpleasantly obvious. The blood weaver's grisly larder was the most unpleasant sight Jason had encountered since the cannibal kitchen that was his introduction to the horrors his new world could hold.

The team searched the entire place, finding neither monster nor treasure. When they had thorough explored the nest they moved from its highest reaches to the roof of one of the buildings to which it was anchored.

"I suppose this means we always need to keep an eye out," Belinda said. "Not that we weren't already."

"Yes," Clive agreed. "It's silver rank, and a stealth-type monster, so it can hide its aura from us. Makes it hard to see it coming. That said, Monsters don't tend to be vengeful, the way people are. They don't have pride to injure. Most likely, the blood weaver will find some far corner of the city and set itself up all over again. It's smart enough to prepare for if we find it again, and also smart enough to not seek us out."

"So what do we do about it?" Neil asked. "Do we hunt it, before it establishes itself again?"

"We didn't come here to kill a blood weaver," Humphrey said. "It was the obstacle, not the objective."

"The blood weaver can prepare all it likes," Jason said. "Time is not on its side. Monsters don't grow stronger, so the most it can do is collect another set of minions, while we're all shooting up like rockets in this place."

"What are rockets?" Sophie asked.

"They're things that go up," Jason said. "Really, really up. You can send people to the moon with them."

"I heard about diamond rankers who teleported to the moons," Clive said. "No idea if its true. How could people get to the moon in your world if they don't have magic?"

"With rockets," Jason said.

"How do they work?" Clive asked.

“Well, you now how when there’s an explosion, stuff flies way?”

“Of course,” Clive said.

“It’s basically that, but you need to be very careful.”

“It sounds like you don’t really understand how it works,” Neil said.

“I don’t know much,” Jason admitted. “Also, I’m pretty sure most of what I do know is wrong. Also, this may fall under stuff Knowledge doesn’t want me talking about. When I take a bribe, I stay bribed. That’s how integrity works.”

“That’s not how integrity works!” Humphrey said, the team laughing at his exasperation. The team had felt the confrontation with the silver rank monster and her army of vampire monsters looming over them as they frenetically trained. Now the fighting was done, at least for now, the tension was draining away like a sluice gate had been opened.

“What now?” Sophie asked.

“The cultist camp,” Clive said firmly.

“Our best bet now is that they were set up here, in the middle of the city, when the blood weaver either spawned or wandered in. Whatever tools they used for whatever they did should be there.”

“The most intact buildings were directly around the central square,” Humphrey said. “Unless the destruction of the tower significantly damaged them, that would be my guess for where they chose to try and wait out whatever the Builder’s plans for this place are.”

“I just hope the purpose for the magic going up isn’t to wake up those giant golems,” Neil said.

“I think we can all get on board with that,” Humphrey said. “The first thing we’ll do is head to the old tower and survey the destruction. We can reassess from there.”

“What about these magic fragments we’ve been seeing?” Neil asked.

“Everything I’ve been able to determine supports Shade’s postulation,” Clive said. “I think they’re just fragments of destroyed treasure. I wouldn’t go eating them, but they shouldn’t pose us any threat.”

“I’m not sure I want to rely on ‘shouldn’t,’” Neil said.

Moving to the very middle of the city, it became clear that the Order of the Reaper’s testing tower had self-destructed in extremely violent fashion. Huge chunks of rubble were laying in the street under the impact marks of the walls they had crashed into. When they reached the square itself, the wide tower had been replaced with a crater.

The buildings around the square looked like they had been shelled. The intact facades the team remembered were riddled with holes, many having collapsed in their entirety, exposing the interiors.

“Probably not in there,” Neil said.

On top of the destruction, the treasure fragments radiating magic were so thick as to be overlapping. It still presented no discernable threat, but was wearying to magic senses, like strobing rainbow lights.

Leaving the buildings closest to the centre behind, the team went looking for those that had retained their integrity and weren't painted in distracting magical shards. They had to be thorough and didn't want to risk splitting up, so it took a day and a half of rigorous searching before they found where the cultists had been holed up. It was two streets back from the central square, conveniently marked by residual webs from what was presumably the battle where the cultists had fallen prey to the blood weaver.

The cultists had made a relatively comfortable home for themselves, with chairs, beds, even rugs. There was a large and well-stocked bookshelf, although Clive snorted derisively on browsing through it.

“I think these guys shared your taste in literature, Soph,” Belinda said, also perusing the tomes. “It looks like there's a lot of 'glistening thighs' books here.”

“Glistening thighs?” Neil asked.

“You know,” Belinda said. “Lots of heaving bosoms and men who don't care what anyone thinks about them yet still have their chests immaculately waxed.”

“That's quite enough,” Sophie said, looking embarrassed.

“She's even been thinking about writing her own.”

“I have not!”

“It's about a woman born into poor circumstances pursued by dastardly men for her beauty, until she's rescued by a dashing man who leads her on a life of adventure.”

“She is completely make this up,” Sophie insisted.

“Jason, do you wax your chest?”

“Shut up, Lindy!”

“I don't wax it,” Jason said. “If I did, I'd use a Jory depilatory cream, not wax. I only ranked-up the other day, though, so I'm mostly hairless right now, anyway.”

“We really need to stop talking about this,” Sophie said.

“You shouldn't be ashamed of what you like to read,” Jason said. “So long as you enjoy it, that's what matters.”

Sophie put her face in her hands and let out a sobbing groan.

Clive found what he was looking for in the basement of the building. The team had initially gone straight to the upper floor where the blood weaver seemed to have burst in, before searching the rest of the building more methodically.

“They must have brought in this with that specialty dimensional bag we found upstairs,” Clive said.

Iron rank dimensional bags had a per-item volume limit slightly smaller than that of an iron-rank personal space power. To store the huge metal plate they had found set into the floor would have required a specialty bag designed to hold that item and that item alone. It was a massive, heavy plate of solid brass. Set into it was an excruciatingly complex magical diagram in silver, along with runes and sigils made of gemstones in a variety of vibrant colours.

The walls of the basement also had magical circles set into them, these ones carved directly from the brick and filled with some kind of blue-tinted plaster. These were much cruder efforts than the delicate, elegant workmanship of the plate.

“What is it?” Humphrey asked.

“I don’t know,” Clive said, lightly, reverently brushing his fingers over it.

“Should you be touching it?” Jason asked. To his magical senses, the plate was even more sophisticated than its appearance suggested.

“It won’t affect us,” Clive said. “This is some kind of astral magic. Whatever it’s doing is working directly with the astral, not affecting the physical realm at all. You could do a dance on top of it and it wouldn’t care.”

“These magic diagrams on the walls are from simple masking rituals,” Belinda said.

“You’re right,” Jason said. “This looks exactly like I would have done when all I had was some skill book knowledge. I’m willing to bet that one of the cultists was loaded up with enough skill book knowledge to set up that big plate to do its thing and throw up some rituals to hide the plate’s magic.”

“To keep passing monsters from coming to investigate,” Belinda said.

“Exactly,” Jason said. “Does that sound right, Clive?”

“Hmn?”

Clive looked up, distracted. “What?”

“Does that sound right?” Jason repeated.

“No idea,” Clive said. “This is going to take me a while to figure out. Jason, take out those books on astral magic that Knowledge gave you, then you should all just go upstairs and settle in. It’s very complicated and you all need to go away. I’ll probably call you and

Belinda down, Jason, to help me go through the books when I have a better idea of what we're dealing with. You've both got at least some training, so I should be able to get some use out of you."

"You make us sound like a Christmas present from an inattentive aunt," Jason said.

"What's Christmas?" Clive asked.

"Never mind," Jason said. He took a bookcase from his inventory, which he had purchased to store everything Knowledge had given him.

"Just make sure you don't forget to eat again," Jason told Clive.

"Did Clive come up to sleep?" Humphrey asked in the morning. The cloud house was set up on the roof of the building, where it had taken the form of an extra storey. It blended right in, even to the point of incorporating the stairwell that led up to the roof as the point of ingress.

"No," Belinda. "Didn't you go check on him in the night, Jason?"

"He shooed me away," Jason said. "I'm going to check on him again, now."

"We should all go down," Humphrey said.

"Definitely not," Jason said. He made his way downstairs, where Clive had set up a table covered in open books and three chalkboards on standing frames.

"Clive..."

"Go away!"

A dishevelled Clive came up into the cloud house and stared around at the team, wild-eyed.

"You and you," he said pointing at Jason and Belinda. "Read this."

He shoved a piece of paper into Belinda's hand it was smeared with chalk dust, but the pencilled writing was as neat as Clive was messy. Jason stood next to Belinda and she held it out so they could read it together. Of the team, they were the only other ones who had studied magical theory. Neil had studied some practical healing rituals but that was the extent of it.

"Well?" Clive asked Belinda and Jason.

"Well, what?" Jason asked.

"Did you understand it?" Clive demanded.

"I did," Belinda said.

"Yeah," Jason agreed.

"Explain it to me," Clive said.

“Mate, if you can’t understand it, I think we might have been very wrong about us understanding it.”

“No!” Clive said and let out a frustrated growl. “Of course I understand it. I wrote it! I need to make sure you understand it.”

“It’s about astral resonance,” Belinda said.

“The idea is to set up a means of remote matching,” Jason added.

“Yes!” Clive said triumphantly. “You two, come with me. I need you to help me go through the books.”

“What you need,” Jason said, “is to get some sleep. You’re looking a bit manic, there, mate.”

“What? No. Shut up! Just come with me.”

“Clive,” Jason said. “Do you remember what you told me about ritual magic? To do it right, not do it fast?”

“Clearly, I wasn’t thinking straight. You can just do it right and fast, now come on.”

“Clive,” Humphrey said firmly. “You are going to get some sleep if I have to knock you out.”

“That’s not really sleep,” Clive said. “Being unconscious is a different-”

“Then you’d best quietly take yourself to bed, then,” Humphrey said. “Because asleep or unconscious, you’re about to get laid out.”

Clive snarled like an animal.

“Fine,” he conceded, then turned back to Belinda and Jason. “You two, get working on those books. Anything that pertains to what’s on that paper I gave you, make a note of book and page, then keep going.”

Clive looked around.

“Where are the bedrooms?”

Neil pointed, not wanting to say anything to aggressive, sleep-addled Clive.

“Not that I’m going to get any sleep,” Clive muttered angrily as he walked off. “My mind racing in a thousand directions. I’ll just be laying there, accomplishing nothing but a magnificent waste of time.”

Moments after settling into the soft embrace of a cloud bed, he was asleep.

Chapter 242

Strong Foundations

By the time the team had spent almost a week in the camp of the former cultists, Belinda and Jason were assisting Clive almost full time in the basement, in the room with the large magical plate set into the floor. They were digging through the texts that Knowledge had given to Jason, finding anything that might be of value to Clive. They slowly gained a better idea of what it was they were looking at and how it might be useful.

"It's clear that the goddess foresaw what we would need and prepared accordingly," Clive said. "Without all this, we would have no chance of figuring out what was happening."

"And how is that going, exactly?" Jason asked. "I'll admit that I've learned more than I thought possible about astral magic in the last week, but what you're looking at is way past my comprehension level."

"It's past mine," Clive said. "We're talking about principles of astral magic that go beyond anything we've managed to uncover in this world. It's like everything I learned prior to accessing these books was stone tools and I've just discovered how to make steel."

"How long until you figure it out, then?" Belinda asked.

"Oh, I think I had it yesterday," Clive said. "I'm just trying to make sure I'm not missing something and completely wrong. Given how many new ideas I'm working with, I could have easily made a simple mistake that put my entire conception way off."

"You figured it out yesterday and didn't tell us?" Jason asked.

"I wasn't going to put forward any ideas until I was confident in them. It's been my experience that making tentative proclamations is more trouble than it's worth. People have a habit of believe the thing they like over the thing supported by the evidence, so I don't like to make statements I'm not confident in."

"That's fair," Jason said.

"There is one thing I'm certain about," Clive said. "Landemere Vane made this plate." Jason looked down at the large plate in the floor.

"You're sure?" he asked. "That means he was working on this before any of us knew this astral space even existed."

"I'm sure," Clive said. "Ritual magic is more than cold, studious calculation. There's an artistry to it, and everyone has their own style. Even you two. Belinda's magic is bold and inventive. Yours is clever, but overcomplicated. Landemere had his own style too."

"And you knew it well enough to recognise now?" Jason asked. "Also, what do you mean, overcomplicated?"

Clive chuckled.

“Jason, it’s like you don’t trust simple solutions.”

“That sounds about right,” Belinda said.

“I do recognise Landemere’s style,” Clive said. “He and I were the astral magic specialists at Greenstone’s Magic Society. He was very reclusive, and secretive about his work. For reasons that have now become rather obvious. When he required assistance, though, I was always the one he turned to. From what little I saw of his work, I could tell it was incredibly advanced, and more than once I urged him to share it with the academic community.”

“I bet he loved that idea,” Jason said.

“He wasn’t receptive, no,” Clive said. “Of course, now I understand that he wasn’t as brilliantly innovative as I thought. He was good, don’t get me wrong, but he was working with what the Builder cult gave him, clearly.”

“It also means that he had this thing finished before I killed him,” Jason said. “That was months before Emir arrived here in Greenstone, let alone revealed the astral space. It means that the Builder cult knew about the astral space and the fact that someone was getting ready to open it up.”

“All they needed was for Emir to collect the pieces of the key and open it up,” Clive said. “For all we know, the person who commissioned him in the first place could be a Builder cultist.”

“That’s a scary thought,” Jason said. “A diamond-rank Builder cultist, having us all dance in the palm of his hand. I don’t think that’s what’s happening, though.”

“Why not?” Belinda asked.

“If the Builder cult had us over that much of a barrel,” Jason said, “they wouldn’t have suffered so many setbacks. They would have been much more on top of things.”

The team were gathered together in the lounge room of the cloud house. Everyone was sitting, except for Clive.

“It’s a beacon,” Clive said. “The cultists who came into this astral space with the rest of us didn’t need to do much more than bring it in here and set it up. That much only took the most basic knowledge of ritual magic. All they needed was someone with basic skills to perform a series of activation rituals. Very simple, just once every few days for about a month until the beacon locked itself into place, dimensionally speaking. After that, all the heavy magic takes places on our world.”

“To do what, exactly?” Humphrey asked.

“To create a tunnel. Or a bridge, whatever you want to call it. The point is that it connects our world to this astral space, bypassing the already established entrance.”

“That also means bypassing its restrictions,” Belinda added. “Including the upper limit on rank.”

“You’re saying more cultists are coming?” Neil said

“Yes,” Clive said. “That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

“When?” Sophie asked.

“At least a month until the tunnel is complete,” Clive said. “It could be two months or more, but definitely less than three. Now that I know what I’m looking for, I used the knowledge in Jason’s books to improvise some tests, but the results are as imprecise as that suggests.”

“Can we leave before it opens?” Neil asked. “Find a way to get the regular portals back open and bring in reinforcements?”

“This tunnel they’re building is responsible for the changes in the magical density,” Clive said. “It’s affecting the dimensional membrane between this astral space and the deep astral. On the bright side, it means that it won’t keep escalating until the astral space breaks down. Less fortunate is the fact that we can’t use the regular portals until the ambient magic here reaches a new stable point. My best guess is that won’t be until some time after this tunnel has opened and closed again and the magic has had time to settle. At that point I can probably reconfigure the portals to the new level of magic and make them operable again.”

“Probably?” Neil asked.

“If you have a more reliable way out of here, speak up,” Clive told him.

“What if we destroy the plate?” Sophie asked. “Would that stop them from getting here?”

“Sadly not,” Clive said. “The beacon’s job was done before we ever arrived. Once they had it’s dimensional location on the other side, they would have been able to start working. They will have been at this for months already.”

“So, to summarise,” Jason said, “after a month or two, during which we will continue to be trapped here, an unknown force of unknown strength but very well-known hostility will be arriving in this astral space.”

“Wonderful,” Neil said. “Which makes our options what, exactly?”

“Obviously, we need to stop what they’re up to,” Clive said. “That may be detaching the astral space from our world or it may concern these giant golems, the world engineers. It may be both.”

“We don’t know what forces will be coming through against us,” Jason said.

“Hopefully, it will only be the remnants of the Builder’s forces from Greenstone. Just before we left, Elspeth Arella informed me of something the interrogators got from the cultists we were finally able to capture.”

“That you were able to capture, you mean,” Sophie said.

“Which is why they were willing to keep me looped in at all,” Jason said. “According to the captured cultists, the local cult leadership was all but eradicated by the attack on their main outpost on that island. The one Rufus and his parents went after. From the information we have, only a couple of mid-tier leaders came through alive to take over. They may have as few as a single silver-ranker left.”

“That’s good,” Humphrey said. “One silver we might have a chance against. If a gold comes through, we’re done.”

“So, what do we do?” Neil asked. “Set traps?”

“Actually, that’s not a terrible idea,” Clive said. “We have time, and we can be confident that they’ll be checking in on those golems. I could set up some traps in those hidden doors.”

“Until then, we train,” Humphrey said. “Even here, we can’t hit silver rank in that time frame. What we can do is get everyone not just to bronze, but consolidated at our new rank. We need to eke out every bit of strength we can muster for what’s to come.”

“That won’t just be a goal,” Clive said. “That will be a necessity. From what I can tell, the magical density will be increasing at an escalating rate as the tunnel draws closer to completion. Even if we never see the trap weaver again, we’ll be meeting silver-rank monsters sooner, rather than later.”

The team left the lair of the dead cultists behind and went back to the task of training. They returned to the frenetic pace of when they were preparing for the confrontation with the blood weaver’s brood, once again unsure of what kind of numbers they would be facing.

A sense of ominous danger loomed over them as they battled time and the fear that their struggles were hopeless. What came through the tunnel when it opened could very well be too much for them to handle, however strong they became. Even the most optimistic conjecture left them as a small insurgent operation against a force that had been preparing to arrive longer than any of them had been adventurers.

The result was that Humphrey never felt a need to push the team. As if a wolf were snapping at their heels, the team pushed ever forward, their only guide the soul compass

leading them from one flesh abomination to the next. Their aggressive schedule found at least one and sometimes two or even three in day. It neatly led them through the city and into the waiting embrace of monster after monster.

Their lives became a war waged on the monsters of the astral space. It was a desperate race against an enemy that, for all they knew, would be impossible to overcome whatever they did. Every passing day moved them closer to the cult's arrival, but every encounter moved them closer to ready. Every member of the team was honed like a knife, not just in ability but in attitude. There were no complaints as each day blended together, training, hunting, resting, over and over. The team burned with a fire to get stronger and they pushed themselves to their limits. Humphrey finally had to enforce a rest day at the end of each week to stop the team from burning out.

They encountered the first silver-rank monsters they actually fought. A pair of jungle cats with no heads, but large mouths on their bellies. Although physically weaker than some top-end bronze monsters, their speed was a danger. Even Sophie wasn't able to keep up, still at iron rank, and she suffered a number of dangerous injuries. Belinda was almost killed outright, only Neil's powerful healing bringing her back from the brink.

Ability: [Grand Renewal] (Renewal)

- Spell (healing, ritual)
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: 1 hour.

- Current rank: Bronze 1 (14%).

- Effect (iron): Conduct a powerful healing ritual that cleanses all afflictions. This ability takes the place of the ritual's material components.

- Effect (bronze): The ritual circle is magically drawn, allowing the ritual to be more quickly enacted and in less ideal conditions.

Neil was able to draw out a ritual circle much like Clive was, although the glowing ritual lines were green and it was only for the one, specific, ritual. That ritual, however, was extremely potent. Importantly, it did not require the normally costly resources of non-essence ritual healing.

A monster surge lasted weeks and was famously a time for active adventurers to advance their abilities by leaps and bounds. Not only did the team experience this phenomenon for longer than even the lengthiest monster surge, but they were not caught

up defending vulnerable population centres. They had nothing to do but strike out, pushing themselves harder and harder, like an adventurer surge visited upon the monsters.

Sophie inevitably reached bronze rank. Her abilities continued to follow a theme of not being flashy individually, instead requiring skill and judgement to draw out their true potential. They were largely improvements and iterations on the iron-rank effects.

Belinda also reached bronze, enhancing her eclectic collection of powers. Unlike Sophie, she had a number of powers whose bronze-rank effects would have a significant impact on the way she operated and, true to form, were useful in support of the team. Her pit of the Reaper ability would no longer cause allies to fall in, meaning that the team's most vulnerable members could stand on top of it while anyone seeking to attack them would fall right in.

Her various powers to replicate different kinds of adventurers also gained important advancement. Her agility power, instant adept, gained magical movement effects such as wall-running and water-walking. Her warrior-replicating power, counterfeit combatant, now gave her access to some simple special attacks. Her specious sorcerer power no longer just gave her the power to wield wands and staves, but also cast some simple spells. While the power was active, she would have access to a force bolt spell and the same life bolt spell that Neil could use.

The team did not just spend their time mindlessly hunting down and killing monsters. Training was also a crucial part of their preparations, delving into things that had been put aside when the blood weaver's army had still been ahead of them. One of the most important aspects of that training was adjusting to their new bronze-rank attributes.

While they had all seen their abilities increase as their attributes moved up through iron-rank, there was a jump in capability as their abilities crossed the threshold of mortal potential and moved into bronze.

Their new strength levels were fairly easy to adapt to, although someone already strong like Humphrey had an easier time than someone like Belinda. The real adjustment was the speed attribute, which governed agility, flexibility, dexterity, coordination and proprioception. The two attributes combined to give the whole team a level of athleticism that was staggering, and would take time to learn to its full potential.

Training to make the most of their new potential brought some much-needed levity to the dour days of regimented training and ceaseless violence. They all had the agility of acrobats and Neil became obsessed with standing back-flips. The whole team took to parkour training with a new verve. Their capabilities meant not just new levels of agility, but also the power to jump further and endure longer drops than ever before.

Sophie took the lead in that training, assisted by Jason. He finally pulled out the bronze-rank skill books for his Way of the Reaper combat system they had won on their last trip to the astral space. They included movement techniques for speed, stealth and the acrobatic traversal of terrain. Sophie learned from the same books the long way. They were enchanted with magical projections to act as guides, although those guides were of distinctly secondary value to Shade. The familiar was well-versed in Order of the Reaper techniques, serving as guide to both Jason and Sophie.

“Miss Wexler, I am certain that at its height, the order of the Reaper would have placed immense value on you as a recruit,” he told her.

“What about me?” Jason asked.

“They may have accepted you as well, Mr Asano.”

Jason had long wondered about the higher-ranks of his martial art, which were skills rather than essence abilities. He knew theoretically that it was the techniques requiring more than human capability, but it was only getting to learn them that he truly understood. It wasn't just the strength of the power attribute and the agility of the speed attribute. There was a situational awareness that came with the spirit attribute that added a dimension to fighting that simply wasn't possible under the limits of mortal senses.

As he watched Humphrey and Sophie spar, he realised that their combat had an almost choreographed feel. They thought faster, had a better sense of their opponents and their surroundings, their spatial sense much sharper. Combat was less fumbling, more precise. Mistakes were punished but so was hesitation.

None of the bronze-rank techniques were reinventing the wheel, replacing existing methods wholesale. The large majority were contextual, for fighting in various circumstances and environments only made possible by bronze-rank attributes.

It was the movement techniques that underwent the more fundamental change. It felt awkward at first, breaking old habits that were ingrained over a lifetime. He and Sophie pushed the team through practise techniques designed to break those habits until new ones took hold.

The comprehensive movement techniques of the Way of the Reaper included techniques that incorporated many common movement abilities. Jason was amused to discover a long distance running technique similar to one he developed himself early in his career, using the weight-reducing power of his cloak. Magical vehicles and access to Shade's mount forms had caused him to largely leave the method behind, but the Reaper technique allowed him to refine it, should he have need of it again.

It was only after working to make use of their new attributes that the team truly understood how transformative bronze rank really was. It wasn't just about the increase in power, but in learning to use it to full effect. It was during this training that Jason realised just how much the bronze-rankers he had seen in the past had squandered their potential.

He thought he had understood why Rufus, Gary and Farrah had looked down on Greenstone's adventurers, having seen for himself how much stronger they were than the bronze-rankers around them. It was only on reaching bronze-rank himself, though, that he fully comprehended the difference. Their training had built a foundation over his iron-rank career that now, at bronze-rank, allowed him to build something truly grand upon it.

Assuming the team somehow managed to overcome the cultists and find a way out of the astral space, he would have to thank Rufus and Gary properly, only now understanding just what a great service they had done for him. As for Farrah, the most he could do was raise a quiet glass to the sky in her memory, one night as he stood alone on the roof of his cloud house.

Chapter 243

A Valiant Death

“I could feel the power he was throwing off like heat,” Thadwick said, full of enthusiasm. “I want that power.”

“And you will have it,” Zato said. “Dougall began the treatments earlier than you, so his power came into its fullness earlier.”

Dougall’s new presence within the cultist enclave had not gone unnoticed. Although he remained in seclusion, all had felt the power radiating off him like heat. They felt the instinctive drive for veneration coming from the star seeds within their souls, and saw the respect with which Timos and Zato treated him. Those who had asked about him, however, had been met with nothing but stony silence.

“Why only us two?” Thadwick asked. “Why not give this power to everyone?”

“Because not everyone is worthy,” Zato said. “Only those of noble blood have the right to the most noble of power. Sadly, our leadership was largely lost. Dougall, like you came to us from the nobility, and is therefore a treasure to us. Like you.”

“I thought I heard someone say he was a servant.”

“No, he had servants,” Zato said. “Like many of the high blood, those around him grew jealous of his inherent superiority and sought to bring him down. We, of course, took him in, knowing that even a drop of noble blood is worth more than all the blood in the bodies of we commoners.”

“The high blood,” Thadwick repeated. “I haven’t heard that term in a while. It isn’t acceptable anymore. My great uncle used to talk like that, until mother shushed him up. We didn’t used to have to treat the rabble like they’re equals. I think my mother actually believes that dross. It always disgusted me about her.”

“You will find no such problems here.”

“Timos didn’t seem too reverent.”

“Which is why I have moved you to my side. You stand above him and, in time, will stand above me. The day will soon come when your voice will be our law. The commands coming from your mouth will be our purpose.”

“Good,” Thadwick said. “I was always told that I was born to a great birthright, only to be denied at every turn. I’m glad to finally find people who understand my value.”

“Thadwick,” Zato said with a smile. “If nothing else, I can assure you that everything you deserve is coming your way.”

A cultist came up to them.

“Leader,” the man said. “The church has started to arrive. Should I send people to meet them?”

“Not until the archbishop appears,” Zato said. “Then, come notify me.”

The church of Purity’s members were arriving at the Vane estate through a portal, in lots. There were fifty eight in total; mostly iron-rank, leavened with a solid contingent of bronze and a sole silver ranker, in the person of the archbishop. It took three portals to bring them all through, with the archbishop arriving last.

It had been hard times for the church members chased out of Greenstone. Only those with at least a full set of essences had been considered worth saving; the rest were abandoned to the investigations of the Adventure Society. They were too ignorant to do any damage, in any case.

The archbishop, Nicolas Hendren, looked extremely disgruntled to have been summoned, although he did, with reluctance, appear. His people were milling about, unsure of what do. The cultists emerged from the cult’s subterranean complex, impassively warding off anyone who approached the no-longer hidden entrance. They refused to interact with the gathered clergy unresponsive to any questions sent their way.

Only once Hendren himself arrived did the cult make an approach. Timos appeared from underground, accompanied by another man hidden completely within hooded robes. Hendren frowned, both at the absence of the leader, Zato, and his inability to sense the aura of the hooded figure. If the cult had reinforced their numbers with a gold-ranker, his ability to direct the course of events would be significantly hampered.

They walked away from the lower-ranked cultists and clergy, Timos with the hooded figure and Hendren with Anisa Lasalle.

“Timos,” Hendren greeted brusquely. He noted the subordinate stance Timos took, relative to the hooded figure. Anisa was standing near Hendren in much the same posture. The figure said nothing as Timos reciprocated the greeting.

“Archbishop. Given our limited space, your people will be required to camp above ground, as I believe you have already been made aware of. Naturally, we have set aside a place for you, personally, in one of our more comfortable chambers, below.”

Timos turned a snide gaze on Anisa.

“Will the priestess be sharing your chamber,” he asked, “or remaining up here to keep your men occupied.”

Anisa’s face curled up into a snarl, but she stilled at a pacifying gesture from Hendren.

“Really, Timos?” Hendren asked. “I would hardly think this is time for such pettiness between allies about to share an undertaking.”

“Some allies are more enthusiastic than others,” Timos said. “Of course, I did not mean to imply anything salacious. I apologise if my unwitting remarks caused your minds to naturally follow an unwelcome path.”

“Just have your people show mine where to set up camp,” Hendren said. “Then there are things in need of discussion, but not with you.”

Hendren turned to the hooded figure.

“Are you the new leader, here?” he asked.

“He’s the leader everywhere,” Timos said. “You will speak to him only when spoken to.”

“This is a poor way to treat allies,” Hendren said.

“You have been poor allies,” came a voice from the hooded figure. The voice was soft and carried no aura, yet somehow slammed into Hendren like a runaway brick cart. He immediately understood who – what – was within the robes.

“Most of our people are unaware of the Lord’s presence,” Timos said. “If you or your priestess are responsible for changing that, the repercussions will be severe.”

“We understand,” Hendren said. “Don’t we, Anisa?”

He was suddenly and fully aware that any influence he had would need to be persuasive, rather than authoritative, which was not where Anisa excelled.

“Yes, Archbishop,” Anisa said, reluctant but obediently following her superior’s lead.

“Priestess, work with the cult’s people to see our own set up. I shall go below to discuss the next step with our allies.”

“Are you certain I shouldn’t go with you?” she asked.

“Quite certain,” Hendren said. “Take command of our people here. Keep them in line and make sure no one starts trouble with our allies.”

He gave her a pointed look.

“Words can hurt us here, Priestess. Be careful that they don’t.”

Timos gave Anisa a smarmy smile, but after the archbishop’s warning it was met with stony indifference. She went off to organise their people without giving Timos a second glance.

Timos led Hendren into the complex below, the hooded figure of the Builder silently accompanying them. Hendren noted that in addition to making no sound, the figure left no footprints in the sandy dirt that had taken over the estate grounds.

“How long until the path opens?” Hendren said as they made their way underground, down the stone steps.

“Days,” Timos said. “Two weeks, at the outside.”

Iron-rank monsters had become infrequent in the overgrown city. When they did appear it was either in great numbers or alongside more powerful variations of their kind. In the first instance, the team didn't even bother to fight them, sending them fleeing with a burst of aura suppression. Only the most mindlessly aggressive were foolish enough to attack, with catastrophic results.

Sophie's wind blade power alone was a disaster to weak, amassed enemies. Its strength wasn't great but it had bronze-rank power behind it. Additionally, the new effect it had gained for ranking up was that the blades grew wider as they travelled, allowing Sophie to cut down weaker enemies in clusters.

Bronze-rank monsters were becoming a decreasing challenge as they team grew their power and honed their skills. It was the increasing frequency of silver-rank monsters that let them push themselves to new heights.

Taking on a silver-rank monster at bronze was not so easy as facing a bronze-rank monster at iron. Each rank represented a larger leap in power than the last, making rank-jumping a trickier proposition with each level of advancement. Silver-rank monsters were easier to handle than even a mediocre silver-rank essence user, but that was not the same as being easy.

Only Humphrey, Jason and, Sophie were able to take on weaker, solitary silver-ranks alone. Even then, they didn't try until they had consolidated their power. Only with a full grasp of their bronze-rank abilities and after advancing them into the lower-mid point of bronze did they even attempt it.

Even then, it was only weak solitary monsters that any of them confronted alone. Such fights were uncommon, as even the silver-rank monsters were appearing in packs. It was generally the most dangerous that appeared alone.

The team was tearing through the city at an ever-accelerated pace, even as the monstrous opposition grew stronger. The flesh abominations no longer posed the threat they had in the past. Once the team was at bronze-rank, the abomination's ability to adapt was no longer the equal of a full suite of essence powers. Belinda especially, with her versatile powers, could adapt to an abomination faster than it could adapt to her.

With their strategies tried and tested over innumerable confrontations the abominations were no longer even worth using for practice. The team went full-force to

down them as quickly as possible and move on. They started clearing two, three, even four in a day, releasing hundreds of the tormented souls trapped within. The team knew they were coming close to the end of their self-imposed task as it took longer and longer to find the abominations by following the soul compass.

Eventually, the compass led them into what they realised was the new territory of the blood weaver. Once more they found the residual webbing and the empty shells of converted monsters.

“The blood weaver will be having a harder time,” Clive said. “The monsters are growing too strong. It won’t be able to overpower and turn them.”

“Maybe,” Humphrey said. “It may have thrown weaker monsters at stronger ones in waves, then turned those stronger monsters.”

“Even if that is the case,” Clive said, “It won’t have been able to do that more than a handful of times.”

“A handful is enough,” Humphrey said. “A few silver-rank monsters is our limit, even as a team. Our abilities are growing, but if we become arrogant or complacent, we can easily die here.”

When the confrontation with the blood weaver came, there were no so many silver-rank monsters as they feared. The nasty surprise was that the blood weaver had managed to capture and turn three of the flesh abominations. Vampiric power combined in dangerous ways with the nature of the flesh monsters, to various effect.

The first unpleasant surprise was that something about the nature of the abominations and their new vampiric state made them less vulnerable to Jason’s blood powers, instead of more, like the other vampiric monsters. The powers still took hold, but at a reduced strength. Fortunately, they still had increased effect against the other vampiric minions.

The other aspect of the vampire abominations was that they could warp themselves to produce an array of different drain attacks. Mana, health and stamina were all drained away by barbed flesh whips, needle claws and eerie, disjointed limbs covered in toothy maws.

By the time they carved their way through to the blood weaver, the team was spent enough that even the relatively weak creature still posed a threat. In the end, though, they were resting atop a building that served as an anchor for the new nest, the weaver and its minions all dead.

Jason hadn't even bothered to pull out the cloud house, the team sprawling onto the tiled rooftop, exhausted. Neil had only half-healed the team back up before he was too wrung out to finish the job.

"That was bad," Belinda said. "Top Five worst fight, easy."

"Top three," Neil said.

"I don't know about top three," Clive said. "I mean, the vortex elementals were number one, right?"

"Definitely," Jason agreed. "The mirror fungus was definitely top three."

"I'd say the stutter hawks, too," Humphrey chimed in. "That's the top three."

"Nope," Neil said. "You didn't have to heal and replenish the team through all those drain attacks. The vampire abominations were worse than the stutter hawks."

"Actually, yeah," Clive said. "I'll accept that. Top three."

"We really shouldn't just be laying here," Humphrey said. "A monster could jump on us while we're not defending ourselves."

"At this point the monster can have me," Sophie said. "I'm getting some rest even if it's the cold rest of the grave. Do you know how hard it is to get tired with my powers? This is the first time I've been genuinely tired since we left Greenstone."

"You want someone to get up, then get up," Neil said to Humphrey.

"Alright, I will," Humphrey said, then didn't so much as twitch. "Am I up?"

"No," Belinda said.

"Well, I tried," Humphrey said. "At least I'll be able to say I died valiantly."

"I'm bleeding on the roof," Belinda said.

"If the landlord complains, I'll lie for you," Jason said.

"That's very decent of you," Belinda said.

Eventually the team did pick themselves up before something climbed up the side of the building to eat them and Neil finished healing the team back up. They decamped to another location and Jason set up the cloud house. Humphrey became everyone's hero by volunteering first watch, while everyone else except Clive went to bed. Clive made his way onto the roof where he conducted the latest in his ongoing tests to gauge the integrity of the dimensional membrane dividing the astral space from the true astral.

"Well?" Humphrey asked as Clive came back down.

"It could be any day, now," Clive said. "not long from now, we're going to be up to our armpits in cultists."

Chapter 244

Ambitions

Over the last week, the ambient magic in the astral had taken on a strange cadence. Like ripples on still water at the footfalls of a great beast, the very space around them was agitated. It grew stronger day by day, until even Sophie could sense it, and she had no magical senses at all.

The monsters were apparently affected, being driven to unusual behaviour. Some hunkered down in the deepest holes they could find. Others gathered into large packs of disparate creatures that would ordinarily be at each other's throats.

When the team found these groups in the early stages of their formation, before their numbers swelled, they would swoop in and wipe them out. As days passed, though, they found themselves avoiding the groups altogether. The numbers had simply grown too large to take on; whole armies of bronze and silver-rank monsters, dwarfing anything the blood weaver had accumulated.

Another reason that team had holed-up in the cloud house was that the changes to the ambient magic started to affect their powers. Sometimes they wouldn't work, other times their effects were unpredictable, mixing up allies and enemies. Fortunately, the vampiric flesh abominations the blood weaver had turned were some of the last. The team knew they had cleared the last one when the soul compass span aimlessly around.

"The strange affect on our powers will pass once the tunnel opens and the dimensional membrane becomes becomes stable," Clive said. "That, or the whole astral space will collapse and we'll be annihilated. Definitely one of the two."

"I don't suppose you'd care to lay odds?" Jason asked.

"I have no idea," Clive said. "My understanding is incomplete, at best. I wasn't going to say anything, but I never figured out how they intend to stabilise the tunnel at this end."

"Uh," Belinda said, "wouldn't that mean that it would essentially shred the dimensional membrane, flood the astral space with magic and it'll do that collapsing thing you mentioned."

"Yes," Clive confirmed.

"And you can't figure out why that won't happen?" Jason asked.

"That's right," Clive said. "But I'm stumbling in the dark, here. We're talking about magic that I barely understand and I've only seen parts of what they're doing."

"That's comforting," Neil said. "As far as you can tell we're all going to die, but you know so little that you might be wrong."

“Pretty much,” Clive said.

“I think I have some cake left,” Jason said, opening his inventory. “If I’m going to be obliterated into astral nothingness again, I’m doing it with cake.”

“What do you mean again?” Neil asked.

Jason was sitting on the roof of the cloud house, talking into a recording crystal.

“So, I’m pretty sure that this whole place won’t just blow up. If it does, you’ll never get to see this, so I’ll make a confident assertion and either come off as right or you’ll never know, so I’m a winner each way.”

He turned the crystal around to point at the sky. There was a large patch that shimmered, sometimes showing a whole different sky. Stars at night, dark clouds, a strange purple.

“We can see the tunnel now, so Clive thinks it’s a matter of hours.”

He sighed, turning the crystal back on him.

“I hope we’re ready for whatever comes through. The last time people went up against the cultists on a large scale, I lost a friend. And that was when the opposing forces were fairly matched. I don’t even know how much I’ll be able to contribute. If they have a bunch of construct creatures, I may not be a lot of help.”

Jason tilted his head like he was listening for something.

“Well, time to go. There probably won’t be another one of these until it’s all over, one way or another.”

He stowed away the recording crystal.

“I’m all done, Belinda,” he called out and Belinda made her way up the stairs on the outside of the house.

“How did you know it was me?” she asked.

“Aura.”

She shook her head. “I need to work on my aura retraction,” she said.

“What’s up?” he asked, waving a hand to make a cloud chair rise up for her to sit on.

“You recording another message for home?” she asked, deflecting his question as she sat in the soft seat.

“I was,” he said.

“Do you think you’ll ever get to show them to your family?”

“I hope so,” he said. “I have fences to mend, there. I have no idea how I’m going to explain any of this. I’m not even sure that my powers will work. My world is magically barren.”

Belinda let out a tired breath, looking up at the sky.

"This is going to be quite something, isn't it?" she asked. "Whether that thing kills us all, or spews out a bunch of evil pricks, this is the last bit of quiet we'll get before things get very busy and very dangerous."

"Yep," Jason agreed.

"It might be a last chance to maybe settle some things that have maybe been hanging over us for a while," Belinda said. "Personal stuff, between members of the team."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Jason said.

"Oh, come on. You know she likes you."

"I know," Jason said. "Which leads me to the question of why you're the one up here."

"She's not exactly good at making herself vulnerable," Belinda said. "She doesn't know what to do."

"I think it's best left alone," Jason said. "Even if we put aside the tangle of issues around how we met, which we can't, it isn't... I don't..."

He sighed.

"Sophie's good at cutting through the nonsense to get to the point. That's something people like me need in their lives. And she's gorgeous, obviously, but that's where the attraction ends for me. I want her in my life and in my team. Neither of us make easy friends, I don't think, but we both make good ones. That's what I want. All I want."

"Ah, crap," Belinda said.

"Yeah," Jason said. "That about covers it."

"What do we do?"

"Nothing," Jason said. "She has to decide for herself what course she's going to take."

"And if that course leads straight to you?" Belinda asked.

"Then she and I will have an awkward conversation and we'll go from there. Frankly, she needs to find herself as an adventurer before she starts adding complications, anyway. Not the running around, hunting monsters part of being an adventurer. She's a natural at that."

"Yes she is," Belinda agreed.

"I mean the place in society that being an adventurer brings. The power and privilege. The money. That's where she's going to need you."

"I'm not just her sidekick, you know."

"I know."

“I have my own hopes and ambitions. I don’t want to just spend my life following her around.”

“I never thought you did,” Jason said. “But you’re the one having this conversation, when it really should be her.”

“She’s just not good at certain things,” Belinda said. “She doesn’t handle them well. I don’t want her to run off, or kick the snot out of you or something.”

“I appreciate that,” Jason said. “So, where do you see yourself landing, down the line? Assuming we survive to escape this mess.”

“I’m liking this adventuring job,” Belinda said. “Not so much the hunting down monsters, but roaming around, tackling interesting problems. I guess I want to end up somewhere between Clive and Emir. Well-studied, but not bound up in the Magic Society, the way Clive is. Taking interesting jobs for large quantities of money, but going out there myself, getting my hands dirty. I don’t want to be a spider in the middle of a web, like Emir.”

“A life of excitement, travel and adventure,” Jason said. “That sounds exactly like the direction the team should be going. Maybe you should be in charge.”

“That works for me,” Belinda said. “I can have Sophie follow me around and clean up my messes for once.”

The sky distortion was directly over the centre of the city. The team had chosen to wait out events from atop a building at the outskirts of the central region, on one of the last intact buildings before the thick ring of jungle took over. Jason had set the cloud house up on the roof. Unlike many other aspects of magic, the cloud flask seemed unaffected by the changes in ambient magic. Clive explained that they had only seen a fragment of the true artistry behind its construction.

When the ground started shaking like an earthquake, they all made their way outside.

“Should we get down off this building?” Neil asked. “It feels like the building is going to collapse.”

“Lets go up on the cloud house roof” Jason said. “I’m pretty sure it will slow-fall us down if the building gets earth quaked out from under us.”

“Pretty sure?” Neil asked.

The team made their way up onto the roof of the cloud house, itself on the roof of a tall building, giving them a good vantage.

At the very centre of the city was the crater that was once the Order of the Reaper’s trial tower. They couldn’t see the ground level there due to the intervening buildings, but

they heard a cacophonous shattering of earth and stone, then a huge cloud of dust and dirt rose up, spreading over the city. Sophie's toxin-purging aura creating a field of clean air around the team as the cloud washed around and past them.

After a few moments, the cloud settled enough for the team to once again see out over the city. In the space over the crater was a giant stone ring, floating horizontally in the air. It was thick and some hundred metres across, slowly ascending through the air in the direction of the sky anomaly.

"I don't remember seeing that," Sophie said. "It feels like we would have noticed something that large."

"It must have been buried," Humphrey said. "That cloud was kicked off when it pushed itself out."

"Any ideas, Clive?"

"All I can offer are guesses," Clive said. "I'm assuming some manner of terminus point for the tunnel, to stop it from annihilating the astral space."

"That's good news," Neil said. "We'll survive long enough to get wiped out by a cultist army."

"Maybe it will stabilise the magic," Clive said. "Open up the portals and give us a chance to escape."

"Escape isn't an option," Humphrey said. "Unless the limit on iron-rank entry has been changed, we're the only ones with the strength to stop the cult. Bringing in more iron-rankers would be animals to the slaughterhouse. The monsters would get them before the cultists."

"Assuming we do have the strength," Belinda said.

"I am assuming that," Humphrey said. "It's the only chance we have of stopping whatever it is they're doing, which we very much want to do."

The team watched the ring slowly rise into the air.

"I believe it is called a ring gate," Shade said, emerging from Jason's shadow. "I've heard of them, but never seen one in operation. As Mr Standish surmised, it is likely the anchor point of the physical reality bridge spanning across the astral between this space and your world."

"An artificial astral space aperture," Clive said.

"Yes."

"You didn't feel like mentioning this before?" Neil asked.

"My knowledge in this area is limited," Shade said. "Even now, I postulate."

The ring continued its ponderous rise into the sky.

“How long has that thing been there, hidden under the ground?” Sophie wondered.

“During my return here, it has become clear that many things were kept from me when I was made administrator of this place,” Shade said. “We have gone places I did not know existed, and were apparently barred to the vessel I inhabited at that time.”

“They didn’t want you to know,” Jason said.

“I believe that to be the case,” Shade said. “It seems to have an age and purpose that goes well beyond the training ground it served as during my tenure here. The Order of the Reaper, and my previous summoner, clearly hid that history and purpose from me.”

“Should we, I don’t know, get ready to attack?” Neil asked. “Catch them as they arrive?”

“No,” Humphrey said. “We have to assume that we’ll be outnumbered and that the enemy will have at least some silver rankers amongst them. We have to make every move with careful deliberation.”

“Insurgency rules,” Jason said. “Guerrilla tactics. Find vulnerable points, soften them up. Create a chance to strike critical points.”

“Exactly,” Humphrey said. “We’ve been tramping over this place for the last five months. We know it better than they do, and we use that.”

“The first thing we need is information,” Clive said.

“Yes,” Humphrey said. “We need to see what come through that ring.”

“It is in the sky,” Sophie said. “Maybe they’ll all just fall down and die.”

“That would be nice,” Humphrey said. “Somehow, I don’t think it’s going to be that easy.”

In the sky of the astral space, the ring finally came into contact with the shimmering anomaly. Immediately, the anomaly began to shrink down, pouring into the space within the ring like water going down a drain. The anomaly concentrated, what was originally an occasionally shifting skyscape becoming a roiling mass in indiscernible power within the ring.

Then, the roiling stopped. A wave of magic flooded over the city like the blast wave of an explosion as the space inside the ring became the still, dark blue of the sky before sunset. Watching from far below, reeling from the magical blast, Jason and his team watched as a figure that seemed incredibly tiny at that distance fall out of the ring. Shrouded in blue light, it drifted slowly toward the ground.

More figures emerged, dropping through the ring and falling to the ground in rapid succession. The team counted dozens, and it was more than just people. There were large

boxes, likewise slowly falling under the power of the blue light, all descending toward the ground at the heart of the city.

“That’s a lot,” Neil said.

“Yep,” Jason agreed.

“Can we handle all that?”

“We will,” Humphrey said.

“So, what now?” Sophie asked. “We need more information, right?”

“We do,” Jason said. “I think I’ll start by taking a look at what they’re up to.”

Chapter 245

Faith and Glory

The power of the ring gate let the cultists drift down from the sky in safety, but they descended into trouble. The cultists drew more than a little attention on their way down, the blue light slowing their fall making them stand out both visibly and magically. The result was a slathering pack of monsters awaiting them on the ground.

The centre of the city had not been monster free for some time. The blood weaver was long gone and even if it hadn't been, the increasing magical density produced monsters with easily power enough to rival it. The magical saturation that had them manifesting thick and fast meant that the centre of the city was now just as infested as the rest.

That meant that the cultists descending first would need to fight out a safe zone for those that followed, but the monsters awaiting them were well beyond their expectations, both in number and power.

The bronze-rankers were able to hold their own against the gaggle of monsters moving in on their location. They were lucky in that no silver-rank monsters had yet appeared. The bronze-rankers were not able to carve out a space for those that followed, however, leaving their fellows to drop right into the jaws of battle. Meanwhile, more monsters poured in, hungry for the prey being dropped from heaven.

The iron-rankers that started arriving were quickly falling prey to the powerful monsters, the bronze-rankers too busy to protect them. Rather than a landing zone, all they had managed to create was a battle zone.

It was the arrival of the Builder's hooded figure that overturned the situation. Spears made of elaborately-carved stone erupted from the ground in clusters, impaling monsters as many as a dozen times. Grand walls, thick and high, rose up in a circle to box out the more widely spread monsters and isolating the closest ones. The bronze-rankers fell on the monsters that survived the spears, quickly establishing the landing zone they had failed to create alone.

The walls were not the solid stone of crude stone-shaping powers but brick and mortar, complete with battlements, observation towers and metal gates in each of the four directions. The result was larger and more elaborate than any silver-rank essence user could conjure up.

There was a command tent at the heart of the fortified camp. It was magically shielded against prying eyes and ears and contained a round table with four chairs. There two occupants, Zato was sitting and the Builder standing.

“Establishing this base camp has overtaxed this vessel,” the Builder told Zato. “It is beginning to break down.”

Evidence of the breakdown was readily apparent. The body of Dougall that the Builder was inhabiting had fiercely bloodshot eyes, sunken flesh and gaunt, pallid skin. Hair had fallen out in ugly clumps.

“The new vessel is ready to be inhabited,” Zato said. “We are working on a third, just as a contingency.”

“It should not be necessary, but I applaud your preparedness,” the Builder said. “So long as I do not use the kind of power that built these walls again, the next vessel should comfortably see us through our task, here. Since this one is close to being spent, I will make some more buildings, establish a true fort instead of these tents.”

“There is one problem with the next vessel,” Zato said.

“It has realised that it will be a hollowed-out puppet.”

“Yes,” Zato said.

“Not a concern,” the Builder said. “Unlike the previous transferral, I am here to participate in person. Resistance will not pose any impediment to the process. This vessel still has a few days before it becomes unusable, so prepare accordingly.”

“Yes, Lord Builder.”

“Make sure to kill this vessel once I am done with it. It will be little more than a walking hunger once I have left it. I do not need to explain why having an energy vampire roaming around would be a poor idea, even if it would quickly starve.”

“I’ll see to it, Lord Builder.”

Timos arrived at the tent, along with the archbishop, Nicolas Hendren. After announcing them from the outside, Timos lead Hendren inside before leaving again.

“Please sit,” Zato said, getting up.

Hendren sat and looked at the Builder. It was his first time seeing the vessel without it being hidden beneath a hood.

“Are you alright?” Hendren asked.

“This vessel channelled to much of my power establishing this camp,” the Builder said. “I will be taking another soon.”

“The Mercer boy?” Hendren asked. “Is that what he was yelling and screaming over?”

“It is.”

“The boy is an idiot,” Hendren said. “His mother spent every scrap of influence she had to make sure he would not have his star seed purged until we had a safe method, then he runs right back to you? An imbecile.”

“Your role in that affair is worthy of praise,” the Builder told Hendren. “My people made a rash choice in implanting star seeds as a distraction. It gave those who would fight us too much information. Placing yourself in the middle and slowing the process of removing those seeds to a crawl was the bold move of an effective ally. Your side and mine have both made mistakes, but individually, you have my respect.”

“The respect of an ally is a valuable thing,” Hendren said diplomatically, then turned to Zato. “May I inquire as to why you asked me to specifically exclude Priestess Lasalle from this meeting?”

“The priestess is a woman of zeal,” Zato said. “The strength of her faith is a testament to your god. That kind of dedication can be inflexible, however, when circumstances dictate compromise. As a gesture of goodwill, I have likewise excluded my own second from this meeting.”

Hendren gave a reluctant nod.

“Anisa is unflinchingly dedicated but, as you say, she can be reluctant to adapt. She gets caught up in the way she feels things should be, instead of accepting them the way that they are.”

“Circumstances here are not as they should be,” Zato said. “The unanticipated change to the magical density will require a number of hard decisions.”

“The monsters are certainly too strong for our iron-rank people,” Hendren said. “Do you know what caused it?”

“Our original astral magic specialist was lost some time ago,” Zato said.

“Landemere Vane,” Hendren said. “It seems Jason Asano was always destined to plague this enterprise.”

A flash of rage crossed the face of the Builder’s vessel, accompanied by a burst of aura that was brief, yet enough to leave the other two swaying unsteadily in their seats. The sounds of the camp outside were stilled to silence as the aura passed over it. The two men waited to see if the Builder would speak, but he said nothing.

“The specifics are irrelevant,” Zato eventually continued. “It seems that our other ritualists made an error in the tunnel formation. Sadly, it was all set in motion months before the Lord Builder was on hand to guide us. They were unable to grasp an element of the design Vane left behind, so they improvised, substituting in another aspect of dimensional magic. That alteration had no effects apparent from the other side, but we are

working with potent dimensional forces. A tiny change became a dangerous fluctuation by the time the bridge was affecting the astral space.”

“You didn’t realise?” Hendren asked, turning to the Builder.

“The senses of this vessel are limited,” the Builder said. “As for this realm, I can only see into physical realities through a vessel or those who carry my seed. That includes a borderline physical space, such as this one.”

“What happened, exactly?”

“The dimensional membrane of this world was disrupted, causing a rapid alteration in the magical density,” the Builder said. “The ring gate has stabilised the tunnel and the plan continues, but the strength of the monsters represent an unanticipated obstacle that will need to be accounted for.”

“The practical result,” Zato said, “is that our people are too weak to carry out the plan. Your people, too. Iron-rankers cannot be sent out under these conditions, even with bronze-rank supervision. There are silver-rank monsters out there, and not just a few. Do you trust your bronze-rankers to handle a pack of silvers? That takes elite and experienced essence users.”

“Adventurers,” Hendren said.

“Yes,” Zato agreed. “I know your clergy had some Adventure Society members, as does our number, but none full time. Neither of us have the people to handle this in the numbers we need. Especially given that the strength of the monsters is not the only reason to be concerned about them.”

“The changes in the ambient magic has agitated the monsters,” the Builder said. “It had altered their behaviour to a degree we don’t yet know. They may settle as the ambient magic does the same but there are no certainties. As it stands, the groups out there are more dangerous than normal monster packs.”

“What about construct creatures?” Hendren asked.

“They will be an integral part of our response,” Zato said. “We still retain a supply of clockwork cores that we will be using to build up a force of constructs. The weakness of constructs is that they need direction. They can supplement the strength of our people, but not replace it. We need more people who can operate independently in this monster environment. We cannot send teams out on tasks if they all need our strongest people to protect them.”

“I’m not sure what you want from me,” Hendren said. “I can’t just bump all my people up to bronze rank.”

“I can,” the Builder said.

“Excuse me?” Hendren asked.

“I can remake your iron-rankers into bronze-rankers.”

“How is that possible? Why haven’t you done it to your own people?”

“Because my followers are the price,” the Builder said. “I can sacrifice an iron-rank follower with a star seed to create a special kind of clockwork core. It can be used to raise another iron-ranker to bronze. I will sacrifice my iron-rank follower to make yours powerful enough to contribute.”

“No,” Hendren said flatly. “We are the church of Purity, in case you have forgotten. We are not going to taint ourselves in the name of short-term power.”

“No?” the Builder asked. “What do you think this pact between myself and your god is? Your deity knows that its objectives cannot be met alone. Without a power from beyond your world, the other gods would stop any attempt to enact your god’s grand agenda.”

“I do not presume to know my god’s purpose,” Hendren said. “My role is to serve. To obey.”

“You don’t even know what your god is after?” Zato asked incredulously.

“The truth is hidden from us, that we cannot despoil our god’s plans, should we be compromised,” Hendren said. “We do not need to know our god’s design. We have faith. We are willing to put aside our base, mortal perspectives and surrender ourselves to a higher power. One that knows better than us. That is better than us.”

“Surely it had occurred to you that my intrusion on this world is, itself, a form of impurity,” the Builder said. “Yet your god participates. Why? Because there will come a time when my agenda is done and I will be gone. It is then that your god will have a chance to undertake a great purge in a world reeling from the damage I have left in my wake. To cleanse the filth and make a world that is clean. While the power structures that would resist you are fighting me, your church will be preparing to move in when I am gone and they are at their most vulnerable.”

“So you say,” Hendren said. “I would not presume to know the intentions of my god.”

“And, in this place, you cannot ask,” the Builder said. “This realm is outside your world, therefore beyond your god’s authority. He has no eye to see, no voice to speak. No hand to move. You are his highest agent, here, Nicolas Hendren. What did your god advise you, before you came here?”

“To do what is necessary,” Hendren said.

“Your god understands the reality,” the Builder said. “That compromise today means purity tomorrow. Yes, there will be sacrifices. These people of yours, once we empower

them, their purpose and destiny will be fixed. They will serve, as necessary, and then you will purge them, once the work is done.”

“I cannot ask this of my people,” Hendren said.

“Faith is about surrendering to a higher power,” Zato said. “Your words, archbishop. Does Purity’s clergy serve only when they want to, or when they are called? What greater honour is there than sacrifice in the service of your god?”

“Making the sacrifice of your people is a burden you will have to bear,” Zato said, “for it is not a sacrifice in which you will share. You will have to remember them. Honour them. Let them be your symbol. Your martyrs. What you do here will show your god that you can be more. A greater servant making the decisions that a leader must make. It is your chance to prove yourself worthy of taking a larger role in the service of your god.”

Hendren frown, looking down at the table in front of him. The absence of his god’s voice troubled him, but it also made him the highest moral authority in the realm in which he found himself. In a way, that made his decisions right for the simple reason that he made them, as was the case with his god.

“Very well,” Hendren said, then looked up from the table to meet the ruined eyes of the Builder’s vessel. “I will need time to bring Lasalle around. She will need to be convinced, to create a unified front.”

“Of course,” Zato said. “We have our own preparations to make. Our own sacrifices to prepare.”

Anisa, as it turned out, was far less of a concern than Hendren had feared.

“We must not be short-sighted,” she said, in response to his explanation. “No sacrifice is too great in service of the god. Even amongst our clergy, few are truly worthy, truly pure. Only those like you and I must be completely vouchsafed. For the rest, sacrifice in furtherance of our god’s agenda is a greater glory than they deserve or have any right to expect.”

Thadwick sat forlornly in a cage, arms hugged around his legs. With the arrival of the cult in the astral space, he had finally felt the full power of ‘Dougall’ on display. He finally came to realise that the power he had been offered would never be his to control, that he was nothing but a cup to be filled and held in the hand of another.

The power inside him that had brought him to bronze-rank, at the cost of his essence powers, had felt so grand, so potent. Now it felt alien; a threat he could not escape because it was already inside of him.

Head bowed, Thadwick did not see the shadowy figure of Shade step through the bars. What he did recognise was the hated voice that emerged from Shade's body.

"Hello, Thadwick. It's been a while."

Chapter 246

Thadwick

Shade's passage through the cultist camp had been easier than anticipated. The camp was divided into three sections; the tents, which was his access point, was the largest section. It was where the bulk of both the iron-rankers were gathered. The crude buildings made with a stone-shaping power were areas he tried to avoid, as one of the bronze-rankers there might have been sharp enough to spot Shade. The very few buildings that looked like they were put together by a skilled craftsman he completely avoided.

The last thing he wanted was to run into a silver-ranker or, if Clive's guess was right, even the Builder itself. Clive knew more than most about great astral beings, even venerating one himself. That was how he knew that it was possible for them to occupy a human vessel, although the process was far from ethical.

Even listening to just around the iron-rankers of the camp, using Shade's body hidden in the shadows. Jason quickly confirmed Clive's suspicions, then extracted his perception from Shade. His actual body was on the ground floor of a large, intact building.

"It's like you said," Jason told Clive. "The Builder had taken a mortal vessel."

"I knew those were more than even a silver-ranker could stone-shape," Neil said.

"What's next?" Sophie asked.

"I'm going back there," Jason said.

"That's a mistake," Clive said. "If the Builder really is there, even in a mortal vessel, it's likely to find you sooner, rather than later. It may even be able to trace you through the familiar bond."

"So you mentioned earlier," Jason said. "I'd actually like to talk to you about that, Clive."

Thadwick's cage was by the wall, moulded by a stone-shaping power from the brick underfoot. The process to prepare him to be the Builder's next vessel had given him strength in the upper reaches of bronze, so the bars were thick and reinforced with containment magic. Thadwick's essence powers were gone, so he had no collar.

The cage had been placed out of the way, behind a pile of damaged storage crates. The circumstances in which the cultists had arrived had been as savage on their supplies as it had on their members. The worthless and broken goods had been tossed aside in a

pile and Thadwick with them. Thadwick was sitting, head down, legs pulled up with his arms around them. Shade's incorporeal body slipped right through the bars, into a crouch.

"Hello, Thadwick," Jason greeted through his familiar. "It's been a while."

On hearing Jason's hated voice, Thadwick lifted his head. His hand snaked out to grab the shadowy figure by the throat, but passed straight through it.

"I'm not really here, Thadwick. I'm speaking through one of my familiar's projected bodies. Even if you could kill it, it would only cost me some mana to replace."

"You survived, then," Thadwick said bitterly. "We weren't sure if you would be able to stay alive in this place."

"I don't think anyone doubted it but you, Thadwick. This place has its dangers, but not so many that a good team of adventurers can't handle it. Neil says hello, by the way."

"I don't want to hear from that traitor."

"Wow," Jason said. "Your aura has changed more than mine, to the point I wasn't sure it was really you. But calling someone a traitor after you kicked him out of your team so you could sign up with an evil cult? That's you all over."

"And smugly looking down on others is you," Thadwick spat back.

"That's fair," Jason said. "We're both so far from that day we met in the marshalling yard, yet our flaws remain the same. That being said, I had something of a revelation in the time since we last met."

"And what's that?" Thadwick asked sceptically.

"That you and I are more similar than either of us would like."

"I am nothing like you!"

"Say it all you like, but it doesn't change anything. It's not like I can claim any credit for the differences that led you to be stuck in this cage, while I'm free to come and go. I just had the good fortune of having people who reined me in before I turned into you."

"You think you're so much better than me, don't you, Asano?"

Jason smiled sadly, shaking his head.

"Thadwick, everyone is better than you. You are literally the worst. You didn't just betray your family and the Adventure Society, although you most certainly did. These people you've thrown in with, they're the enemy of the whole world and everyone in it. You betrayed your entire world. You're worse than people who beat their children or rob and kill the elderly. You're worse than the cultists you've joined. They might follow some twisted, power-hungry ideology, but at least they act out of passion. They didn't just look at someone else causing death and destruction on a global scale and join in out of pique because the world didn't give them what they felt they were entitled to."

“You think you understand me?”

“Yes, Thadwick. Not to kick a man when he’s down, but you’re a bit simple.”

Thadwick lashed out again, his hand once more swiping harmlessly through Shade’s shadow body.

“Also, a little slow on the uptake,” Jason added.

“Screw you, Asano. You’ll never get out of this astral space alive.”

“Maybe,” Jason said. “If I die, though, I die as myself. While my familiar was poking around, I pieced together how you ended up in this cage. The Builder’s really here in person? Walking around inside some poor sap?”

“He is,” Thadwick said, the disdain in his voice pushed out by dread. “He used too much power building this camp and all but burned out his current vessel. The next poor sap is me.”

Thadwick’s eyes lit up with a spark of hope as his gaze on Jason’s familiar body grew intent.

“You can get me out!” Thadwick said. “I can help you. I’ve seen things. I know things. Things that can help you.”

“You’re probably right,” Jason said, “ but I can’t help you. This familiar’s body can’t break you out, or get you over the wall. I can’t even offer to put you out of your misery before the Builder takes you. All this body can do is drain mana.”

“You could come yourself, with your team. The things I know are worth the risk.”

“I’m not going to walk my team blind into a fortified position full of powerful enemies,” Jason said. “If nothing else, I don’t trust you. We could easily find the bad guys waiting for us because you warned them in hope of a reprieve.”

“I wouldn’t do that!”

“Yes, Thadwick, you would. If anything, it would be more of a surprise if you didn’t betray us.”

“I could start yelling, you know,” Thadwick said. “Let everyone know that you’re here in the camp.”

“They already know,” Jason said. “Oddly, they’ve been waiting for us to finish our conversation. I guess whatever they did to you dulled your senses. Or perhaps it’s just the old Thadwick obliviousness. You never did pay much attention to anything that wasn’t yourself.”

“I’m looking forward to hearing about your death,” Thadwick said.

“Even if it comes, Thadwick, you won’t be the one hearing about it. Very soon, someone else is going to be in possession of your ears.”

Thadwick's face paled at the thought. He bowed his head, looking down instead of at Jason.

"How is my family?" Thadwick asked softly.

"Your betrayal wasn't exactly good for them," Jason said. "It would have been worse if your mother hadn't picked up the city like a rug and shaken most of the cultists out. She was trying to rescue you, before everyone realised you went willingly. She was still trying after, for that matter. She took longer than the rest to believe it, though, your mum. I'm pretty sure she still thinks it was some implanted impulse that made you go back."

"Maybe it was," Thadwick said to the floor, his voice beaten and hollow. "It was the power. I could feel it, in the memories from the first time I had the seed. I still don't really remember the first time. You don't keep control, if they have to force it on you. I only had flashes, but I remembered the feeling of power. That was clear. The power I'd always been promised, but never seemed to receive."

He looked up, staring at Jason through Shade's body.

"That was the lie, wasn't it? The lure."

"Yes," Jason said softly.

"Please," Thadwick begged. "Please get me out of here."

"I'm sorry, Thadwick. Strangely, I really am. But you've dug a hole so deep that all you can do is wait for the sides to fall in. Anyone who jumps in will just get buried along with you."

"Please..."

The familiar body moved out of the cage and stood upright.

"Goodbye, Thadwick. The next time I see you, I don't think it will be you in there."

Shade walked out into the open, not bothering to hide as behind him, Thadwick started screaming his name, cursing him to the heavens. Zato was waiting nearby, cultists from around the camp looking over.

"You're the leader?" Jason asked.

"Zato," he introduced himself.

"Jason Asano. Thank you for being patient."

"We have both treated Thadwick poorly. Not undeservedly, but he still came to Builder willingly, in the end. I will not begrudge him a last conversation with the closest he can get to a friend, even if it is an enemy."

"I'm not sure if that was a kindness or not," Jason said.

Zato looked in the direction of the cage, where Thadwick was still screaming.

"Would you be willing to move to a more discreet location to talk?"

“Certainly,” Jason said. “I thank you for the civilised welcome.”

Zato led Jason across the camp, in the direction of the few small buildings that were truly well-constructed. There were cultists and constructs all over. Purity clergy as well, although Jason didn’t spot Hendren or Anisa. He quietly hoped he knew exactly where they were.

“Did the Builder knock these ones out personally?” Jason asked, gesturing to the better-made buildings they were headed towards.

“He did,” Zato said. “I’m taking you to our command residence.”

“Command residence,” Jason said. “I like that. It has a feel of dignity. I’d like to thank you for the civil welcome,” Jason said. “Thadwick’s an old, well, not friend, but... I can at least tell his mother that he had someone to talk to at the end.”

“We can hardly bring any harm to your familiar’s projected body, so why be barbarians about it? There’s nothing in the camp we need to hide from you. All you will find here is that you do not have the strength or the numbers to handle us.”

“It is intimidating,” Jason agreed, eyeing a large construct. It was similar to a beetle, with a hard body and six legs. The rather confronting difference was the neck, which was long, flexible and segmented, ending in what looked like a rhino’s head, but with a bladed fin instead of a horn. Jason could feel the faint aura of the construct, which was silver rank.

“Is that a construct version of a real creature?”

“Construct cores are variations on monster cores,” Zato said. “They create more powerful versions of ordinary monsters.”

Zato led them to what looked like a stone cottage and went inside, holding the door for Jason to follow. Inside was a surprisingly comfortable sitting room, replete with arm chairs, a couch and a nice rug on the floor.

“Not your cloud house, I’m sure,” Zato said, “but not bad, in a pinch. Please, sit.”

“Not much point,” Jason said. “My familiar is intangible, so I’d have to fake it. It’s very nice, though. It could maybe use some house plants.”

“The Lord Builder doesn’t care for them.”

“It’s his house, I guess.”

“Yes it is,” the Builder said, walking into the room. He emitted no trace of aura that Jason could sense.

Jason looked at the Builder, He was wearing plain robes with the hood pushed back, revealing a cadaverous face. Even so, it seemed familiar.

“Who’s the poor bloke you’re inside now?” Jason asked. “He looks kind of familiar, but I can’t place it. Probably because it looks like you’re going Weekend at Bernie’s on the poor guy.”

“Weekend at Bernie’s?” Zato asked. “I’m not sure I follow.”

“Asano likes to makes references people from this world will not understand,” the Builder said. “The purpose is to put them off balance. Pay it no mind.”

“You took possession of my brain for a little while,” Jason said. “It makes sense that you know all my tricks. You and the goddess of Knowledge should get together and play Mario Kart. Do gods and great astral beings socialise? I suppose you must, since Purity seems to fit neatly into your pocket.”

“He also likes to talk continuously, derailing the conversation,” the Builder said. “He moves it into his own pace that he might control it. The inside of his mind is an interminable place.”

“Don’t go spilling all the beans,” Jason said. “Forget about my head, though. What about this guy you’re inside of right now?”

“This vessel has encountered you before,” the Builder said. “While he was a servant at the Vane estate, he captured you. Twice.”

“Wait, he’s the shovel guy? Jason asked. “What was his name? I want to say... Dougie?”

“Dougall,” the Builder said.

“No, I’m pretty sure it was Dougie.”

“It was Dougall.”

“You might want to have another rummage around that head, mate. The bloke should know his own name.”

“You are attempting to aggravate me,” the Builder said.

“Mate, I’m doing that just by walking around. I’m a living monument to your failure. Why would I bother to try and tick you off even more?”

“Because you find it fun.”

Jason laughed. “You really were inside my head, weren’t you?”

“And now you are inside one of the Reaper’s brood,” the Builder said. “Why would one of the Reaper’s shadows stoop to involving itself in mortal affairs?”

“An oddly hypocritical criticism, coming from you,” Shade said. “I was ever my own being and am free to do as I wish.”

“You should have chosen a better summoner,” the Builder said. “This one will be dead, soon.”

“Perhaps,” Shade said. “He’s died before.”

“You seem confident,” Jason said to the Builder. “You think I can’t beat you?”

“We have the numbers and we have the power,” the Builder said. “Overcoming us is impossible for you.”

“So was kicking your interdimensional arse out of my body, yet here we are,” Jason said. “I’ve beaten you before and I’ll beat you again. I did say I’d have pants, next time, but my legs aren’t here, so this doesn’t count.”

“The reason I invited you,” Zato interjected, “was to discuss the possibility of mutually acceptable resolution.”

Zato had stepped back on the arrival of the Builder, but stepped forward when proceedings continued to remain contentious.

“You want a truce?” Jason asked.

“No one doubts that you can cause us some trouble,” Zato said. “It is equally evident, however, that you cannot, ultimately, stop us. Therefore, we suggest a compromise.”

“You can’t seriously think that we’d go for that?” Jason asked.

“This astral space, as I’m sure you are aware,” Zato said, “is quite unusual. The connection it has to the larger world is artificially supported. That means that we don’t need to destructively rip it away, as we have with other astral spaces. The controlled unravelling of the astral bindings will let it drift away without causing any harm.”

“So,” Jason said. “What you’re proposing is that we just let you have this one?”

“In return, we shall open a portal back to the world. We get the astral space, you and your team get out alive and we can go right back to fighting over the next thing. We can even throw in Thadwick, if you want him.”

“He’s not much of a sweetener,” Jason said. “I can’t make that decision. “I’ll have to consult with my team.”

“Of course,” Zato said.

“Just so you know,” Jason said, “I’ll be voting to turn you down. And I do have my persuasive moments.”

“I would also like for you to decline,” the Builder said. “I would rather put you to death here, but Zato has convinced me of the merits of this proposal.”

“He does seem pretty on top of things,” Jason said. “Not what I look for in an enemy, to be honest. I actually kind of like him. I don’t suppose you want to join team Hopelessly Outmatched, Zato?”

“No, thank you.”

“I don’t blame you, mate. Is Zato your first name or last name?”

“It’s my only name.”

“Oh, a mononym,” Jason said brightly. “Like Cher. Have your boss tell you about the music video for If I could Turn back Time. That could be a good look for you. Bold, but I think you could swing it.”

Jason looked at the Builder’s expression.

“Ooh, I think he’d getting grouchy,” Jason said. “I’d best make myself scarce before he changes his mind on the whole deal.”

“Best that you do,” the Builder warned.

“I’m just going to have Shade dissolve his body here,” Jason said. “Wouldn’t want you following me home.”

“Please give my proposal consideration, Mr Asano,” Zato said. “I would rather come out of this with a respected enemy than a vanquished foe.”

Shade’s body faded into nothingness.

“Do you think he believed me?” Zato asked.

“No,” the Builder said, “but it doesn’t matter. Our people are almost upon them.”

Jason opened his eyes and turned to Shade.

“How long?” Jason asked.

“They are less than two minutes out.”

Shade had two of his bodies stationed between their location and the Builder camp.

Jason tossed his aura senses over the dummy auras Clive had set up. They were subtle and impressively close to the originals. Given that the enemies hadn’t sensed their current auras, they should be completely indistinguishable from the reality.

Jason started running. He had been looking and speaking through Shade from the bottom of a large, intact building; exactly the kind of building that would make a good encampment. He extricated himself from the building and looked up, spotting one of Shade’s bodies on the roof of the adjacent building.

He quickly teleported through a chain of Shade’s bodies to where the team was waiting on a rooftop, several buildings away. That brought him to the rest of the team, several buildings away and inside an aura suppression ritual circle Clive had set up.

“Well?” Neil asked.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “Clive was right. The Builder was able to track me through the link to Shade’s body.”

The contingent was a mix of clergy and cultist, made up of the fastest-moving people they'd been able to muster. They poured into the building, eager to find and cut down Asano before he fled, hopefully catching the rest of his team in the process. They arrived in the bowels of the building, pulling up short when they reached the complex ritual circle that was the source of the auras they had locked on to.

"What is this?" a priestess demanded, as Timos, the leader of the cultists' contingent went wide-eyed.

"We need to get out!"

Even as he yelled, their magical senses picked up previously dormant power coming to life around the building.

The team reached the adjacent rooftop just in time to see the end of the building's collapse. They were swamped by a dust cloud, Sophie's aura once again keeping the team's air clear.

They dropped down to ground level, Jason sharing his slow fall power with Belinda and Neil. With Sophie's aura continuously clearing the air around them, they went to check on the unstable rubble.

"That's it, isn't it?" Belinda asked. "That has to have killed them, right?"

"Depends on who they sent," Humphrey said.

They were only just beginning their examination when they heard the rubble shifting in the cloud of dust ahead of them. Slowly, something pushed its way up and out, broken chunks of masonry tumbling away as it rose up from the debris. Through the haze, they saw a dome of magical force ascend from the shattered remnants of the building. Inside were three figures, who spotted them, in turn.

Jason had never seen Timos before and didn't recognise him. The other two he did: Anisa and her archbishop, Nicolas Hendren.

Chapter 247

The True Danger

Archbishop Hendren had apparently put his barrier up in time to completely shield the three, who were barely even dirty after having had a building dropped on them. The dome flickered out of existence; anyone with magic senses could detect that huge amounts of mana had been poured into it. This was of limited help to the team, as one of the many problems in facing a silver-ranker was that they had no shortage of mana to spend.

Anisa's aura, like Sophie's, cleared the air around her, the archbishop and Timos. As they stepped forward and the two auras overlapped, suddenly the air between them was cleared.

"Clever," Hendren said. "Luring us into a trap. We were rushing to catch you before you left the area and weren't as cautious as we should have been."

"You didn't have to survive to tell us that," Jason said. "Your immediate death would have been compliment enough."

"Cleverness will only get you so far," Hendren said. "It will always falter in the face of true power."

"That's just what clever people have tricked you into thinking," Jason said. "Because they're, you know, clever."

"Don't spare him words," Anisa said. "He deserves only death."

"Anisa, if deserve had anything to do with what we get in life," Jason said, "A meteor would have landed on your head years ago. You've had it out for me from the day we met and I'm thinking it's time you and I put this thing to bed, one way or another. You and me, purification versus affliction. Are you willing to pit the power of your god against the darkness in the heart of man? The man being me. Or the darkness is me; I shouldn't have used a metaphor. Me stab-stab, you heal-heal. What do you say?"

"I will take pleasure in shutting that mouth for good," she said.

Jason leapt forward, Anisa's gaze focused on him as orbs of light manifested around he body. Then, beside her, when Hendren called out a warning.

"Behind you!"

Hendren's silver-rank senses had noticed the approach of Stash in the form of a rodent climbing over the rubble. Even as Hendren yelled, Stash was taking the form of one of the monsters they had encountered during their time in the astral space. His new form had the body of a rhino and the legs of a mountain goat, but no neck or head at all. The

front of his body was taken up entirely by a mouth ringed with teeth, with a pair of barbed, prehensile tongues.

Monster-Stash lunged at Anisa but Hendron shoved her out of the way, stepping into the space she occupied. Despite being much smaller and lighter than Sash's monstrous form, Stash was sent tumbling away with a loud, slapping backhand.

Anisa, meanwhile, had tumbled herself from where Hendren had shoved her out of the path. Sprawled on the uneven rubble, she looked up at the enemy to find not Jason, but Humphrey, propelled through the air with the power of a special attack.

The rapid-fire sequence of events happened over just a moment. It was a testament to the team's relentless practise. Week after week, day after day and hour after hour of fighting monsters together had turned them into a well-oiled machine. The improvised tactic had begun with Jason calling out Anisa.

The team knew that he was a poor match-up for the Purity priestess and his call for a singular confrontation was a signal to do the exact opposite. If he was drawing attention to himself instead of vanishing to seek out opportunities, it meant he was looking to create a distraction. While he was normally the dagger in the dark, Jason also liked to play waving right hand as the left hand struck.

The left hand, this case, was Humphrey. Humphrey directed Stash through their familiar bond, knowing that he would be detected and the silver-ranker would be quick enough to react, but have little time to make that reaction. Even if the archbishop had a quick-shield power like Neil's, Humphrey was betting on an instinctive reaction to push Anisa out of the way. Humphrey bet on that and was already moving, lunging for the spot he expected the priestess to be, rather than where she was at the moment he launched his special attack.

Ability: [Flying Leap] (Wing)

- Special attack (combination, movement)
 - Cost: Low stamina.
 - Cooldown: 10 seconds.

 - Current rank: Bronze 4 (19%).

 - Effect (iron): Swift and powerful leap with some limited air control that can be combined with normal or special melee attacks. Physical damage from these attacks is increased.

 - Effect (bronze): All damage from melee special attacks combined with this ability is increased, regardless of damage type.
-

Humphrey grew larger as he sailed through the air, courtesy of Neil's Giant's Might spell. He also brought his heavy sword down in an overhead smash as he leapt, his most powerful, Unstoppable Force attack. Enhanced by the leaping power, it fell on Anisa like divine judgement. Neil, lightning quick with his spells, managed a second spell before the attack landed, using Bolster to further enhance the attack.

Anisa quickly threw up a shield, even as her three orbs moved to intercept Humphrey's sword. There was a sound like shattering glass as they crumbled, one after another. With the triple enhancement of Neil's spells and Humphrey's combined special attacks, the Unstoppable Force power lived up to its name.

Bronze and silver ranks represented very different stages of advancement for an essence user. Silver was like a whole new world, where what was a danger to ordinary people were no longer a factor. Bronze rank was the first step beyond normal, mortal potential, but only a small one. Only at silver rank would Anisa have been able to survive having Humphrey's sword bury itself in her body.

Anisa had been something of a perfect weapon against Jason's powers, with abilities to inhibit his death by a thousand cuts style, both in protecting herself and cleansing afflictions. Jason had guessed as much long ago, which is why he had immediately signalled for his team to make the move.

Humphrey was the opposite of what she was best at, his potent, singular attacks relying not on repetition or sinister after-effects. The single, overwhelming attack was as dangerous to her as she was to Jason, which is why Humphrey was kicking her corpse off his sword just moments into the fight.

The archbishop snarled in rage, throwing a hand out that blasted Humphrey, even enlarged by Neil's spell, tumbling back. Jason, forgotten in the wake of Humphrey's attention grabbing assault, had positioned himself to strike at the distracted archbishop. Despite his rage, however, Hendren's reflexes were quick and he hadn't abandoned his attentiveness when surrounded by enemies.

Jason's dagger barely drew blood, while the backhand retaliation was far more powerful. Neil was once again on the ball, a shield appearing around Jason to negate the attack, buying Jason the moment he needed to back off.

Timos, through all this, read the situation and reacted immediately, in the exact opposite way to the archbishop. Rather than lunge into the attack, he activated two separate movement powers in quick succession as he fled, followed by a chameleon power that made his departing form hard to spot. Jason quickly cast a spell in his direction as a parting shot.

Ability: [Castigate] (Sin)

- Spell (curse, holy, tracking)
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 4 (06%).

- Effect (iron): Burns a painful brand into the target, inflicting slight transcendent damage and the [Sin] and [Mark of Sin] conditions. The brand cannot be healed so long as the target retains any instances of [Sin].

- Effect (bronze): Inflicts or refreshes the duration [Weight of Sin]. You gain the [Marshal of Judgement] boon.

- [Sin] (affliction, curse, stacking): All necrotic damage taken is increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

- [Mark of Sin] (affliction, holy): Prevents aura retraction. Cannot be cleansed while target retains any instances of [Sin] or [Legacy of Sin].

- [Weight of Sin] (affliction, holy): Target suffers transcendent damage when subjected to a holy boon, recovery, healing or cleansing effect.

- [Marshal of Judgement] (boon, tracking, holy): Know the distance and direction of anyone bearing a [Mark of Sin] placed by you. This effect lasts as long as any mark is still in place and cannot be negated.

Unless Timos had an ability like Jason's to escape tracking effects, Jason would know where Timos was, roughly, until the cultist found a way to remove the afflictions. Most of Jason's afflictions had a lengthy duration, but Sin would never drop off until it was cleansed, meaning that Mark of Sin and Marshal of Judgement would likewise remain in effect perpetually. Timos showed no intention of doubling back, however, as Jason sensed him moving directly away from them at speed.

Jason and his team had seized the initiative with their powerful opening gambit, taking a dangerous enemy off the board. No fight against a silver-rank essence user could be that simple, however. Even alone, the threat Hendren represented was only marginally diminished by the loss of his bronze-rank companions. He had always been the true danger.

The team had also gone through a number of their more powerful abilities with their opening moves. Having them on cooldown and not immediately available again moved the momentum in Hendren's favour. He had used his near-indestructible dome ability, but was otherwise fully loaded with powers.

The furious archbishop conjured a staff into his hands, a wooden staff covered in runes. As Sophie moved in before he went after one of her less-resilient team members, he demonstrated that he was fully capable of using it to the full extent. He unleashed a dizzying array of spinning attacks, Sophie wildly moving to intercept them with her arms, legs and fists.

The air was full of dust from the freshly-demolished building, aside from the bubble of clean air created by Sophie's aura. The rubble underfoot made for unsteady footing, but neither Sophie nor the archbishop seemed troubled, dancing around one another as if they were on solid ground. Humphrey could not match the feat, so waited the few seconds for his leap attack to become available before once more hurling himself into the fray.

While it wasn't his Unstoppable Force attack, it was still startling to see the power of two of Humphrey's special attacks completely arrested by nothing more than an ordinary staff block, the silver-ranker not even staggered as his staff continued to spin dangerously as it went after both Sophie and Humphrey together.

Hendren was close to an exact rank above the bulk of the team, in the low-to-mid range of silver. He had no abilities that enhanced his speed or strength, but his silver-rank attributes still made him faster than Sophie and stronger than Humphrey. The margins weren't so large, but embodied in a single person, the result was easily the most formidable foe the team had ever encountered.

Hendren's martial skills, while highly trained, were not the match of Humphrey or Sophie, being more on the level of Jason. They were still more than dangerous when combined with his silver-rank strength and speed and a barrage of special attacks.

As a human, the archbishop had plenty of special attacks available. They mostly seemed to be of the moderate power, short cooldown variety, which allowed him to chain them into well-practiced sequences. He could extend the length of his staff, create a storm of illusionary jabs that still inflicted damage or seamlessly integrate magical blasts from his staff, even while using it as a melee weapon. As he executed attack after attack, hammering at Sophie and Humphrey, he was also able to adroitly navigate the uncertain footing.

While Hendren was no match for Danielle Geller or Thalia Mercer, he still towered above the kind of trashy silver-ranker that languished in Greenstone instead of seeking greater heights in the wider world. If Sophie and Humphrey were all he had to deal with, then he would have finished the fight already.

Humphrey and Neil both had their summons ready nearby and had called them in once the fighting started. Despite the continually worsening odds, the archbishop continued to fight off all comers with what looked like disheartening ease.

Clive's staff blasts were much less effective than normal as Hendren had the same Crystallise Mana power as Neil, Humphrey and Clive himself. The extremely common power, at silver rank, left five crystals floating around Hendren that not only intercepted magical projectiles but reflected them back. This sent Clive's staff blasts back in his own direction, where his own three crystals absorbed the attacks.

Clive fought cross-legged on the bag of Onslow, the floating tortoise offering him some easy manoeuvrability on the rough terrain of the ruined building. He didn't have Onslow use his powers, which were better for picking off small fry.

Belinda didn't even bother with weapons, concentrating on the support role. Her echo spirit familiar was helping Humphrey make illusionary duplicate attacks, which partially compensated for his speed deficit against the archbishop, as well as his lesser ability to navigate the dangerously unstable footing.

The force-bolts of lantern familiar, Shimmer, proved more dangerous to her than the enemy, given Hendren's defences. She could have used it to help Clive overwhelm those defences to get his staff-blasts through, but the reflected damage was an extra threat they couldn't afford. Instead, she used it to project shields to protect her and Clive from the occasional blast of Hendren's own staff, sent in their direction. That left Neil free to concentrate on keeping Sophie and Humphrey in fighting shape.

Stash had shifted form again and taken the shape of a needle scorpion, with tough armour and the ability to shoot spines from its tail at a distance. Gordon was also attacking from a distance with beams.

In spite of the ranged attackers, it was Sophie and Humphrey that held the archbishop's attention the most. Ultimately, their bronze-rank power could not inflict any critical wounds against his incredible, silver-rank resilience. Only Humphrey had proven a genuine threat, with his powerful attacks and ability to ignore the resistance Hendren otherwise enjoyed against lower-ranked attacks. The threat of Humphrey and mobility of Sophie were the only things preventing Hendren from running rampant over the battlefield.

Sophie's attacks, while only minimal in damage, did punch through the silver-ranker's defences. It was her physical intervention that was the greater impediment, however. Just through positioning she was constantly setting up Humphrey to make attacks, heightening the threat he posed.

Blocking an overhead blow from Hendren's staff drove Humphrey to one knee, despite getting his sword up in time to block it. Hendren followed up with a kick to the chest that sent Humphrey tumbling back, although he didn't go far across the rubble.

Sophie could almost match his speed and could certainly match his skill. Her damage was limited, however, and her special abilities were being countered. Hendren was an experienced fighter, and it showed. He seemed to know which abilities he could ignore, which, required blocking and which required an active counter from an ability of his own.

When Sophie tried to blast him off his feet with her wind power, for example, he planted his staff and used an immovability power. Sophie's ability then did nothing more than ruffle the priest's combat robes.

Humphrey and the archbishop met weapon to weapon, dodging attacks and hitting back hard, Hendren making full use of his superior speed to force openings and follow up with special attacks. Even with his potent armour, it was only the steady stream of shields and healing from Neil that kept Humphrey in the fight.

Jason was keeping Colin inside him, concerned that the priest of Purity may well have had an answer to Colin's swarm state. If the silver-ranker had some kind of area power it could rapidly pulverise the leeches, so Jason kept Colin at the ready. Once more of the priest's bigger powers had been teased out and put on cooldown, he had Colin for a trump card if necessary. At the moment, he was more interested in the extra healing that Colin would provide him.

Jason was acutely aware of how dangerous the enemy was. Jason was not as resilient as Humphrey and Sophie. One good hit from a silver-rank special attack could kill him outright. His normal methods of sneaking around, using Shade's bodies to stage blindside attacks would be far less effective against silver-rank senses.

His only margin for error was however much he could stack up the protective power of his amulet by laying on afflictions, but there was only so many he could land with spells alone. A scroll of system messages reflected the stark reality of fighting a Purity priest using afflictions.

-
- [Umbral Snake Venom] has been cleansed from [Nicolas Hendren].
 - [Necrotoxin] has been cleansed from [Nicolas Hendren].
 - [Leech Toxin] has been cleansed from [Nicolas Hendren].
-

Hendren constantly and passively cleansed himself, meaning that Jason would need to bring his dagger into play to overwhelm that power. Unless he could get a good base of afflictions that his Inexorable Doom spell could then build upon, Hendren's cleansing

power would wipe even that spell away. He was hesitant about jumping into the fray, as even with the reach of his shadow arms, the danger the archbishop posed was a daunting proposition.

The only bright spot was that the one hit Jason had landed early was the Punish special attack. It had delivered the Price of Absolution ability, which Hendren's ability was apparently unable to cleanse. The effect itself was minor, inflicting a small amount of transcendent damage whenever a Sin affliction was cleansed from the target. The damage was negligible to the silver ranker, but the important part was that the affliction stuck. It indicated that Hendren's cleansing powers might not be able to remove holy afflictions.

While Jason was being largely ineffectual, Clive charged up and unleashed his most powerful spell, Wrath of the Magister. It was further boosted by Neil's Bolster spell, which enhanced a single ability use. Clive was confident that it had the potency to really hurt even a silver-ranker.

Clive unleashed the spell and the rainbow light poured from his hands, but Hendren held up his own hand in a stopping motion and a magic circle appeared in the air in front of it. The rainbow light of Clive's spell deflected off the magical shield, Hendren redirecting it at Humphrey instead.

Clive couldn't abort the spell without suffering a backlash he definitely wouldn't survive. He was forced to go through with it, but the rest of the team did not let him down. Their hard-won experience shone through as they reacted instantly to the unexpected reversal. Jason's shadow hand snaked out and slapped Humphrey on the back, passing over all the charges he had accumulated on his amulet. Neil threw up a shield and a second, wall like shield appeared between Humphrey and the spell, courtesy of Belinda's familiar.

Despite the best protection they could offer, Clive's power created a void in Humphrey's chest. The shield's siphoned off enough power that the void was smaller than normal, but still ripped a hole in Humphrey's armour and torso that would have killed an iron ranker outright. Even a sturdy bronze-ranker like Humphrey collapsed immediately to the ground, hovering on the brink of death.

The pressure was suddenly off Hendren, but instead of pressing Sophie or the team, he took the chance to start dismantling the mess of summons that had been hounding him. The dragon tooth warriors were battered apart in short order and he went to work on the golem, which was swiftly pushed into its chrysalis state. As much as she wanted to protect that source of pressure on Hendren, Sophie stood by as he tore through their support. She

was not going to give him an opening to finish the job on the stricken Humphrey until her teammate was back on his feet.

Hendren threw her a sneer, fully aware of her intentions. After demolishing the summons, he used the freedom of not being attacked to cast a spell. A large mass of disruptive-force blasted at Gordon, massively damaging the incorporeal entity. The floating cloak of its body tore like tissue paper and Jason immediately drew his familiar back into himself.

In a move that left the team in shock, Hendren then demonstrated that not every special attack at his command a low-cooldown power with commensurately moderate damage. He raised up his staff and the runes etched into it started to brightly glow. He hammered the end down on the chrysalis state of the golem which, to date, had proven impervious to any form of attack. Not only was it damaged, but cracks spread throughout, glowing with the same light as the runes on the staff. The glow grew brighter and the cracks kept spreading until the chrysalis and the golem inside exploded, raining crystal over the battlefield before dissolving into stinking, rainbow smoke.

Chapter 248

Forsaken Place

Humphrey lay on the ground, barely conscious, his life spilling from the savage wound in his chest. The rest of the team's circumstances were not much more promising, with the summons destroyed and the seemingly indestructible enemy too dangerous to even approach. Jason's afflictions, the means by which they had overcome so many strong enemies, were falling off as fast as he could put them on, even the ones being applied retributively by Jason's aura. The team's most powerful magic attack had been turned back on them, leaving them in the precarious position they now found themselves.

Hendren had seized the chance to alleviate the pressure on him by destroying the summons and sending Jason's familiar into a state not much better than what Humphrey was in. The only blessing was the brief reprieve the team received in turn as the silver-ranker's attacks were not aimed at them. Neil, not needing to be primed to throw a shield out at zero notice, had time to cast his big, long-cooldown healing spell.

Fountain of Renewal combined powerful, healing and mana recovery effects that covered the whole the team, at the cost of a cooldown measured in hours. Despite that potency, however, the spell did not save Humphrey's life. That was accomplished by a power of Humphrey's own.

Ability: [Immortality] (Might)

- Special ability (healing, recovery)
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: 24 hours.

- Current rank: Bronze 3 (16%).

- Effect (iron): Instantly restore a large portion of health, mana and stamina. Amount restored is based on how depleted health, mana and stamina are when the ability is activated.

- Effect (bronze): Gain ongoing health, mana and stamina recovery effects. The strength of these effects is based on how depleted health, mana and stamina are when the ability is activated.

It was the power Humphrey had gotten from the legendary awakening stone of rebirth, his share of the reward from Emir for success in their first journey to the astral space. The effects were miraculous, healing light blazing from under Humphrey's skin, all through his body. At iron rank, the light would fade after the initial healing, but at bronze

rank, the light merely dimmed. Humphrey pushed himself to his feet, the crater in his chest reduced to a gaping wound.

The wound continued to heal from the potent healing effects stacked on Humphrey; the lingering effect of his Immortality power and the effect of Neil's spell. Fountain of Renewal actually conjured a fountain in their air, spraying illusory water than carried very real rejuvenating power. There was also the effect of the amulet shield that Jason had passed over. When consumed, the instances of protection became an ongoing healing effect.

Humphrey reconjured his armour that had a large hole in the front and the sword which had vanished when he dropped it as he fell. Humphrey then went after Hendren like a man possessed.

It was not fury; his mother had trained him too long and too hard to let rage take over. It was a controlled intensity, driven by his passion but not consumed by it. Every bit of strength and skill Humphrey could muster he unloaded onto the archbishop, who was startled to find himself pushed back by an enemy he had thought finished. Hendren had dealt with most of the summons, yet to him, it was as if his foes had doubled in number, not halved.

Jason took the chance to get in some sneaky hits, Hendren letting them go as he withstood Humphrey's barrage. With no immediate harm, Hendren trusted his ongoing cleansing powers to continue handling the afflictions. Jason was happy for him to think that, finally having enough of an affliction buffer to lock in some spells that would stick.

Humphrey's resurgence was a powerful swing in the fight, but it could not solve the ultimate issue that they could not land definitive damage on their opponent. Humphrey's surge could not last forever and inexorably, the archbishop retook the momentum.

Without the summons at his back, Hendren was better able to focus on Sophie and Humphrey, battering them such that Neil's shields and healing, even with Belinda's support, was being slowly, yet inevitably overtaken. If not for the overlapping mana recovery effects the team enjoyed, Neil's contribution would have already run out.

The team still managed to hold on. Hendren realised that even though he had pushed back the assault of Humphrey, the thief girl, Wexler, was becoming harder and harder to deal with. A traditional guardian-type was most effective against a multitude of lesser attackers, whose myriad strikes couldn't breach their defences. She thrived against a single attackers, evading powerful attacks that a traditional defence-focused adventurer could not endure.

Hendren had found her hard to deal with from the start, always exactly where he didn't want her to be. Even though he was faster than her, she clearly knew how to make better use of her speed, which left him feeling slower. He could only periodically land hits with the aid of his special attacks, and even then, she had some ability that accumulated defensive power over time and expended it in protective force when she was finally hit.

Without the additional trouble of the summons, he had been free to make several attempts to focus her down, but every time he did she became even more elusive. She would suddenly speed up, his magical senses detecting space itself warping as her reflexes briefly eclipsed his own.

Even some of his special attacks had fallen short. He had tried to pin her down with an attack that duplicated his staff and attacked multiple times, faster than he even his silver-rank perception could follow. She had turned into a blur that impossibly dodged or blocked every attack.

Now, when he felt he should be pushing the enemy past the point of resistance, she was harder to deal with than ever. Her attacks were growing stronger; not just the impact but the magical damage that came with every strike. His own attacks were harming her less and less, while attacking anyone but her triggered retribution damage that passed right through his defences.

For Sophie's part, she had never felt more powerful. Never had they encountered an enemy that could hold up so imperviously to everything the team could throw at him. The result was that an ability that had limited impact on fights in the past became increasingly important.

Ability: [Karmic Warrior] (Balance)

- Special Ability (healing, recovery)
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 3 (20%).

- Effect (iron): Gain an instance of [Agent of Karma] when subjected to damage or any harmful effect, even if the damage and/or effect was wholly negated.

- Effect (bronze): Gain an instance of [Good Karma] when healing others, cleansing others or suffering damage. Enemies that attack or take offensive actions against you are inflicted with [Bad Karma]. So long as any enemy has an instance of [Bad Karma], you have [Karmic Sacrifice].

- [Agent of Karma] (boon, holy): Bonus to the [Power] and [Spirit] attributes. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
 - [Bad Karma] (affliction, retributive, holy): Suffer a small amount of retributive, transcendent damage when making an attack or other offensive action against anyone without the [Karmic Sacrifice] boon. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
 - [Good Karma] (boon, holy, stacking): Bonus to [Recovery]. Damage from enemies with [Bad Karma] is reduced. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
 - [Karmic Sacrifice] (boon, holy, heal-over-time): Gain an ongoing healing effect, with strength determined by the amount of [Good Karma] you have accrued. This effect immediately ends if there are no enemies suffering from [Bad Karma].
-

Every attack that landed made her all the stronger. She eventually realised that the archbishop had caught onto this and was no longer trying to finish her off with special attacks, simply trying to manage her as he went harder at Humphrey.

Hendren's perception power let him sense the boons and afflictions, so he sensed the holy power gathering on the thief girl each time he landed a hit. Frustratingly, his ongoing cleansing powers could not eliminate holy effects. He only had one power that could, but he was saving it for when Asano made his inevitable move.

The thief girl was moving from a nuisance to a powerhouse, but it was still within the realm of bronze rank. She was not yet enough of a problem that Hendren had to take drastic action. For all that her damage was increasing, plus the retribution damage that went right through his defences, it was not yet on a scale that threatened his silver-rank fortitude. His ongoing health recovery was still enough to compensate, which meant that, for the moment, he could afford to leave her be.

Hendren had been paying attention to Asano throughout the fight, despite the affliction specialist accomplishing no more than a few futile spells, the afflictions quickly falling away. During Humphrey's push, Asano had managed to get a few afflictions in place with melee attacks, using those stretching shadow arms to attack from relative safety.

As the fight progressed, it became clear to Hendren that the afflictions Asano had put in place were multiplying themselves faster than his passive ability was clearing them off. He realised that Asano and Sophie were the primary threats, the type that never tired and grew stronger and stronger, the longer a fight went on.

Hendren felt the magic in the afflictions on himself activate when Asano used a spell, sending death energy through his body and rotting at his flesh. Hendren knew then that it was time to reset the board and put paid to the power Asano and the thief girl were building up.

The team was blasted back as Hendren used a new special attack. He set his staff floating in the air in front of his outstretched palm, spinning in a rapid blur and blasting out wind akin to Sophie's Wind Wave power. It inflicted no damage but knocked the whole team back as Hendren swept his arms around, the windmilling staff moving with it. Only the heavy Onslow was unmoved, who turned a slow, disgruntled head around as Clive tumbled off his shell.

Hendren used the moment he bought to cast a spell, holding an arm up where a sphere of clean, white light started shining. It erupted out in a blinding flash, washing over everyone. For a short but critical moment, the team were unable to see.

"You think afflictions can take down a priest of Purity?" Hendren called out as the team recovered.

-
- All of your affliction on [Nicolas Hendren] have been cleansed by an effect that ignores all cleanse prevention.
 - All of your boons and the boons on your items have been negated by an effect that ignores dispel prevention.
-

The dazzle faded and the team's vision returned to find that Hendren had made a move on Neil while the team couldn't see. This had been trumped by Belinda, who had had anticipated Hendren making a big move, casting her own spell as he had cast his.

Ability: [Unexpected Allies] (Charlatan)

- Special Ability (dimension, teleport, illusion)
 - Cost: Very high mana.
 - Cooldown: 10 minutes.

 - Current rank: Bronze 1 (67%).

 - Effect (iron): You and your allies take on the illusionary form of nearby enemies, but your allies can still recognise one another. All allies and enemies in the area are randomly switch-teleported.

 - Effect (bronze): Create illusions of your allies.
-

Hendren had seen a lot of powers in his career, but Belinda's unusual suite of abilities was filled with rarities. As well as being a delight to Clive, it let her affect battles in ways their enemies didn't anticipate.

Every member of the team had been altered by illusion to look exactly like Hendren himself, while illusionary doubles of the team had been brought into being, then switch-teleported with the real thing. Hendren's attack when the team was blinded killed off nothing but an illusion.

The team was out of formation, scattered randomly by Belinda's power. It left them all out of position but Hendren had no way of telling one team member from another until they acted and broke the illusion. Unsurprisingly, this started with Sophie and Humphrey, who lunged at Hendren. Closer than either of them, one of the illusionary archbishops started chanting out one of Neil's healing spells and Hendren made a rushing attack to interrupt.

'Neil' avoided the attack by vanishing into his own shadow, appearing nearby and slashing at the archbishop with a dagger held in a shadow arm as a cloak of stars appeared around him. He disappeared into another of Shade's bodies right before Hendren annihilated it with a staff attack shrouded in disruptive force.

Sophie and Humphrey were on Hendren then, as Jason fired off spells as quickly as he could coherently chant the incantations. As he did, he received a warning from Shade, who still had two bodies positioned between their current location and the Builder's walled fort.

"Shade just told me reinforcements are on the way," Jason told the others through voice chat. "We have to get this done, so I'm going aggressive. Neil, I'm going to need those shields. Belinda, help him keep them coming, because I'm going to need it. First, though, I'm going to need the good stuff."

"Are you sure?" Neil asked.

"I don't have time not to be," Jason said.

"Alright," Neil said. "Here goes."

Neil chanted a spell and Jason felt a power flood through him like a supercharged spirit coin.

Ability: [Hero's Moment] (Growth)

- Spell (boon, holy, recovery)
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: 24 hours.

- Current rank: Bronze 2 (87%).

- **Effect (iron):** Bestow a powerful boon on an ally, increasing all attributes and resistances by a significant amount. They receive damage reduction, their maximum mana and stamina are increased and they gain ongoing mana and stamina recovery. They ignore the effects of rank-disparity. When this effect ends, they are temporarily debilitated, suffering the inverse of all previous effects.
 - **Effect (bronze):** Affected ally's essence abilities have increased effect.
-

Neil then used his Bolster spell, which Jason used to conjure a new and more powerful dagger. The bolstered version would make the afflictions it bestowed more potent than normal.

Hendren's silver-rank senses were allowed him to pay attention to the whole field of battle. He had figured out which of his enemies was which, and which were illusions. He spotted the healer throwing spell's on Asano and knew a push was coming. It galled him that bronze-rankers had driven him this hard and knew he needed to put an end to proceedings.

He made another dash at the healer, but it was a feint as he immediately stopped and used a special attack on the empty space in front of him. The thief girl fell for the bait, moving into place right as the attack activated. Light shone up from the ground, trapping her in place.

It would normally only hold someone for a short moment, but a silver-rank power on a bronze-rank enemy gave him more time to spare. He turned on Humphrey, charging into support and again used his spinning-staff wind blast to send Humphrey flying.

He turned back to the thief girl, who had been discovering that movement powers were suppressed in the silver-rank trapping field. He raised up his staff, the runes glowing brightly, the way it had when he shattered the golem chrysalis into fragments. He brought it down on the thief girl as the light field faded away.

Sophie caught the descending staff in one hand, leaving the archbishop in disbelieving shock. She gave him a savage grin as she slapped a palm right into his chest. Red light glowed under her hand, the same light that had spread through the golem and destroyed it. The light spread through the archbishop's chest and then exploded, leaving him with a wound much like Clive had left on Humphrey.

Hendren was a silver-ranker, however, not a bronze. His body was closer to the amorphous flesh Clive had once described to the team, and his fortitude was far higher. Even with a gaping cavity where a normal person's heart and a good chunk of their lungs

would be, Hendren little more than paused before resuming the fight with Sophie. He hadn't even dropped his staff.

His body started glowing with internal light as he activated a powerful self-healing ability. Humphrey arriving back to press the fight once more.

Jason also joined the melee, with both himself and his dagger rippling with power. He was faster, stronger and tougher than ever before. Around him were three of Shade's bodies; all that were still present. Of the seven total bodies, two were still off scouting, one had self-destructed in the enemy camp and one had been destroyed by Hendren.

Jason had a very different form of aggression to Humphrey or Sophie. In the early days of his training, he had naïve ideas about being the perfect counter-striker, deceptive and cunning. As his understanding of fighting developed and he gain new powers, he had gained a better understanding of what was possible and what worked best for him.

He had kept the deceptive and manipulative parts, using his cloak, his shadow arms and the bodies of Shade to play with perception and distance, toying with his enemies. He even used aura manipulation to project false positions.

The goal was to provide opportunities that, for other fighters, were worthless. When all he needed was there merest wound, his idea of a successful attack was, to other fighters, a failed strike. It was an unusual margin for success that allowed him to use trickery that for most fighters would be wasteful play-acting.

Jason used every trick in his repertoire against the silver-rank priest. Even empowered by Neil's incredible spell, he was not the equal in speed or strength of the archbishop. He did prove, however, that he was a match in skill after all.

Again and again, Jason made nothing but a grazing slash, but that was all he was after. his empowered dagger revealed the lack of protectiveness combat robes suffered in return for flexibility and lightness. As someone who used them himself, it was something he was very much aware of, using that knowledge to know how far he had to push. All the while, Sophie and Humphrey pushed the archbishop as well.

That was not to say that Hendren did not hammer blows on all three in return, especially focusing on Jason. For a short while, though, Neil was assisted by Belinda in burning through cooldowns to repeat shields on Jason. His afflictions stacking up also quickly added stacks to his amulet. Even piling on, however, they could not outlast a silver-rank essence user. Hendren continued relentlessly, the healing light closing the wound on his chest even as the others flagged. Jason took a couple of big hits, hurting him even though the layers of protection.

“It’s time for the second coming of Humphrey,” Jason said through voice chat. In response, Belinda cast a spell on Neil.

Ability: [Blessing of Relentlessness] (Adept)

- Spell (boon, magic, recovery)
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: 24 hours.

- Current rank: Bronze 2 (94%).

- Effect (iron): Reset all cooldowns of a single ally of bronze-rank or below.

- Effect (bronze): Affected ally gains a powerful, ongoing mana and stamina recovery effect.

It was the big sister to her ability to reset one affliction, giving one ally a once-per-day full power reset. The advantage of letting someone with their own once-per-day power use it back-to-back was obvious.

Neil repeated his Hero’s Moment spell, this time on Humphrey. As when he recovered from Clive’s spell, Humphrey pushed hard into Hendren, surging forward in an aggressive attack. Neil’s potent boon, normally usable only once per day, raised his strength to a level even above his silver-rank opponent.

Neil followed up with his Giant’s Might spell for good measure, turning Humphrey into a towering hulk that could for the brief while the spells lasted, overpower his enemy with pure strength. With both Jason and Humphrey under the effect of the spell, though there was a danger looming at the end of the spell’s duration.

Neil’s Hero’s Moment spell was a Cinderella magic, and when it wore off, Jason and Humphrey would turn back into pumpkins. The spell’s end would bring with it debilitating effects as potent as the boosts the pair currently enjoyed.

Jason went wild with his dagger piling on afflictions, before leaving Humphrey to bundle up the priest while Jason backed off to cast spells. He locked in his full affliction sequence, under a heavy block of dagger-inflicted maledictions, then cast Punition, which inflicted damage for every affliction he was suffering. Finally, the familiar traces of black rot from Jason’s power became visible on the enemy.

Hendren slammed his staff into the ground, sending out a blast wave that knocked even the giant, empowered Humphrey away, let alone the rest of the team. Further, he left the staff standing vertically in place, blasting out force waves that continued pushing them away. Unaffected himself, Hendren started chanting out a spell.

A bolt of dark blue magic erupted from Belinda's outstretched hand, still laying on the ground where the wave of force had sent her falling. It ignored the pulsing waves of force and struck Hendren mid-incantation. Belinda's aura was flush with the power of the silver-rank spirit coin she had just taken to make sure her attack was not resisted.

Ability: [Power Thief] (Magic)

- Special attack (boon, affliction, magic)
- Cost: very high mana.
- Cooldown: 5 minutes.

- Current rank: Bronze 3 (21%).

- Effect (iron): Make a magical ranged attack. You become able to use a random active-use ability of the target, who cannot use that ability until you have done so. It can be an essence ability or the inherent ability of a magic creature, but functions at your rank, not the rank of the target. You may not use the ability more than once. This ability cannot be used again until the copied ability is used. If not used within 24 hours, the copied ability is lost, restoring the target's ability to use it.

- Effect (bronze): You can choose a specific ability of the target. If the target does not have that ability, a random ability is stolen instead.

One thing that Belinda had learned about this particular power was that when choosing a specific ability, she wasn't restricted to just designating abilities she knew the target possessed. She was able to designate as the targeted ability one that the enemy was in the process of using. Her instant-use special attack was faster than the somewhat lengthy spell Hendren had bought the time to cast with his force wave power, and his spell was cut off as she stole it for herself.

She collapsed as the power of the spirit coin drained out of her. She would be able to make no more contribution to the fight, while Jason and Humphrey were close to being the same. They could both feel Neil's spell reaching the limit of its duration, while they were still held back by the waves emitting from the staff.

"You think that's enough?" Hendren screamed wildly, spitting mania. "You think it can ever be enough? There is no stain that true Purity cannot burn out!"

Hendren started casting yet another cleansing spell, but Jason used one that was faster.

"Feed me your sins."

The priest's life-force became visible, filled with a distressing amount of taint for a priest of Purity. Jason's Feast of Absolution spell took it all. Jason's passive Sin Eater

power gave him an immediate burst of mana and stamina, along with a pile of the Integrity boon, granting ongoing health, stamina and mana recovery.

More importantly, Feast of Absolution left, in the wake of the dark and sinister afflictions, the transcendent light of holy afflictions. They filled up his life force, then lit up Hendren from the inside when his life force once again retracted out of sight.

Hendren fought through the pain and finished his own cleansing spell which, to his shock, did nothing.

“Holy?” he asked as he dropped to one knee. “How can it be holy? How can you... you, of all people...?”

It was as if the shock of being ravaged by holy afflictions was more debilitating than the ravaging itself. Hendren dropped completely to his knees, throwing back his head. He did not even seem to notice the transcendent damage burning him from the inside out

“Lord!” he cried to the sky. “Why can you not speak to me in this forsaken place? Why did you send me here?”

“In case you hadn’t noticed,” Jason called out to him, “your lord is bit of a prick.”

He chanted out his spell to finish the job.

“Mine is the judgement, and the judgement is death.”

Hendren didn’t acknowledge Jason or his words, dissolving into nothing under transcendent light, face still gazing at the sky.

Chapter 249

Being What he Needs to Be

Jason could barely stand in the wake of Neil's spell wearing off, but he determinedly pushed himself to his feet.

"We need to move with alacrity," Shade said. "The cult's forces approach."

Jason nodded, pausing only to spare what was left of Anisa a brief glance. He was again reminded that most of the people he had first met on arriving in this world were dead. Most of the Vane family, their servants, Farrah and now Anisa. For all the wonders his new home offered, it took its price in horrors, and Jason was unsure if he had become one of them.

"Shade, grab her dimensional bag and mount up."

The possessions of the archbishop had automatically been looted by Jason's power when his execute ability completely annihilated him. Looting powers could extricate goods from personal dimensional spaces, although Jason didn't stop to check what he had taken.

The team left the ruined building behind. Shade had taken the form of some large lizards, well-suited to navigating the terrain. Sophie and Clive had already helped Belinda onto the back of Onslow. Having taken a spirit coin, she was in worse shape than Jason and Humphrey. Jason and Neil rode Shade out, Humphrey rode Stash, while Sophie easily kept pace on foot. They didn't stop for hours, making sure to get well clear of the site of their battle.

Once they were confident there was no one trailing them, rest became the next order of business. Jason pulled out the cloud house inside a building they found with an internal space large enough to contain it. It was a church, although not to a god any of them recognised. Any lingering divine aura the building might have once hosted had long ago faded away.

Sophie took watch, keeping an eye out for cultists scouts. Humphrey, Jason and Belinda retreated into the house to recuperate, as neither spirit coin usage nor Neil's spell could be rushed through recovery using magic. They quickly fell asleep in the comforting embrace of cloud chairs while Neil kept an eye on their conditions.

Before collapsing, Jason had divested himself of everything his looting power had plucked from the archbishop's personal storage space. Clive went over it, along with the contents of Anisa's dimensional bag.

There was a very large number of potions and a startling amount of money. Hendren, it seemed, had taken a large chunk of the church of Purity's coffers with him on

'sabbatical.' Those things he put aside, in favour of a good-sized collection of documents and a very full bookcase.

"It's mostly correspondence from higher-ups in the church," Clive said to Neil, going through the documents. He had taken a quick peruse of all the items and was now taking a closer look at the documents.

"Anything useful?" Neil asked.

"I'm not sure how much of it will be of use to us," Clive said. "The Adventure Society will definitely want to get their hands on these, though. There is correspondence here with explicit statements about the agreement between the church and the cult."

"Anything about why the church of Purity would throw in with these people?" Neil asked.

"Not at a glance," Clive said. "It'll take me a while to go through it all properly. It does seem that the ones siding with the cult are only a fraction of the church, though."

"That makes sense," Neil said. "If the whole church knew, there's no way they could have kept it a secret."

"There also seems to have been a concern that a lot of the church members would not be accepting of the arrangement."

"You mean they thought priests who literally worship Purity wouldn't be accommodating to a cult that fills people's bodies and souls with evil magic junk? That was probably a good assessment."

"I have to think that most of Purity's worshippers aren't secretly evil," Clive said.

"I suspect Jason would disagree."

"Well, Jason has his biases," Clive said. "He comes from a world where the gods apparently don't show themselves at all and let the people wage wars over the truth. Then he comes here, and the first clergyperson he meets is that priestess we just killed. She wasn't exactly a good ambassador for the virtues of faith."

"Then it turns out an ostensibly good church is in league with an evil cult," Neil said. "I can see why he might end up wary of the whole thing."

"Even the Purity church members who are in on it clearly don't like the people they're allied with," Clive said, gesturing absently with a sheet of paper. "This is a letter to Hendren, more or less telling him to put up with it and do what he's told. While the faction working with the cult certainly believe they have their god on their side, they seem very unhappy with the alliance. It seems the cult had to pressure the church into coming along on this expedition at all."

“I would have been happy for them to stay at home,” Neil. “I imagine they would be too, now their leader’s been dissolved into nothing.”

Neil glanced warily over at the sleeping Jason.

“Does Asano ever scare you at all?” he asked quietly. “Most of the time he seems ridiculous, but sometimes he really, really doesn’t. When he just walked into that town and killed all those bandits. The way he looked at them, like they were nothing.”

“Jason is good at being what he needs to be, in order to do what he needs to do,” Clive said, likewise speaking softly. “Sometimes, what he needs to do is kill a lot of people. And yes; seeing what he becomes to do that does scare me a little.”

“Hopefully, it scares the Builder, too. From the Builder’s perspective, pulling in the church for this must seem like a waste, now. He brought along an extra silver-ranker who didn’t accomplish anything but die.”

“Their rush to put us down cost them one of their most powerful people,” Clive said. “Whatever else, we can be certain that the Builder isn’t happy.”

“This has worked out very well,” the Builder said. “Losing Hendren’s power is a blow, obviously, but he was a reluctant ally at best.”

“You want to step up the kind of procedure we use on his people,” Zato said.

“Precisely,” the Builder agreed. “Now that the church’s leadership here is dead, there is little concern about any survivors reporting to their god when we are done here. We no longer have to take half-measures in converting the clergymen, to protect Hendren’s sensibilities.”

“There are other bronze-rankers in their number,” Zato said.

“None who held a leadership position like Lasalle. That they died together helps us more than either of them surviving. None of the remaining clergy will be able to pull the rest together and effectively resist our intentions. Take them into custody and prepare the iron-rankers for immediate conversion.”

“What do we do with their bronze-rankers?” Zato asked. “We can’t convert them with clockwork cores we get from sacrificing our iron-rankers.”

“That is a question,” the Builder said. “The failure to summon the clockwork king and the cores it could produce truly was the beginning of things going wrong with your operations. If your former superiors had the ability to adapt to circumstances you have demonstrated, we would be in a better position right now. You have demonstrated a talent for making the most of what you are given. What do you suggest?”

Zato rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“We could prepare them for use as additional vessels, but that would take too long. Maybe...”

Zato’s gaze lingered on the ruined body of the Builder’s withered husk of a body.

“You’re about to abandon that vessel,” Zato said. “You have instructed me to see it destroyed, but perhaps we can put it to a better use.”

“Explain,” the Builder said.

“We feed it the bronze-rank clergymen. Fatten it up, then send it after the Rejector and his people. An energy vampire gets little from feeding on monsters and will go hunting for richer meals. It may well be able to sniff out the souls of our enemies. We can make it our hunting hound, flushing them into the open, or even killing them outright. It might not work, but what does it cost us to try? A spent vessel and some priests we would probably have to execute anyway.”

“Your proposal has merit,” the Builder said. “An energy vampire will have no interest in our people. The soul and body modifications you have undergone make you unpalatable to them. If we are going to convert all the clergy or feed them to the vampire directly, then it will have no more interest in us.”

The Builder nodded, dry skin flaking of its face at the gesture.

“Very well,” the Builder said. “Seize the clergy, prepare the iron-rankers for conversion and collar the bronze-rankers. Prepare a binding circle to hold the vessel once I am done with it and we shall conduct the vessel exchange. Afterward, we can begin the conversions.”

“The more thorough conversions than we originally intended will add to the time required,” Zato said. “It will better prepare us for the next step, however. We have to assume that once we start sending teams out, the Rejector will try and intervene.”

“Let him,” the Builder said. “His rejection of the star seed may have inured him to further implantation, but his companions enjoy no such immunity. I will take them, one by one, and he will watch. Once that is done, they will be the ones to kill him.”

“How many potions can one person carry?” Belinda asked, looking at them all stacked up. “We didn’t bring in this many for six people over a series of months.”

“These are iron, bronze and silver-rank,” Jason said. “This is probably the supply for his whole contingent.”

The team was going through what they had taken from the Archbishop. His most important gear had been on his body and destroyed along with it, but looting his personal storage space had still yielded a slew of valuables. Since they were already going over

loot, it seemed like a good chance to tally their collected loot from months of monster hunting, which they added to the pile.

They had a lot of materials that would be valuable for crafting. At an earlier stage they had purged their stocks of the iron-rank materials to make room for bronze and silver. They also had what had become a huge stockpile of monster cores, on top of the essences and awakening stones picked up along the way.

Fully-functioning magic items were produced by Neil and Jason's looting powers far less frequently than materials. The rarity of such items was mostly low, although the silver-rank monsters they fought had produced a few items that were more impressive. They were all silver-rank, so not yet of any use to the team. One item in particular stood out amongst the others.

Item: [Orb of Ascension (Silver)] (silver rank, legendary)

An orb containing the most precious power of all: potential (consumable, magic core).

- **Effect:** A single epic or legendary quality bronze-rank item gains the ability to be increased in rank through a ritual of ascension. Additional material requirements vary based on the effected item.

A few of the bronze-rank items had been claimed by the team. Jason had replaced his iron-rank boots with a pair of black boots taken from an insectoid monster called a night hopper. The new boots were higher rank but lower rarity than his existing boots, lacking the whip-blade function that Jason had used only occasionally, but always effectively.

As they moved onto bronze and silver-rank monsters, the iron-rank boots had become increasingly battered. Without the self-repair function of his main armour, they had become so ragged that he feared they would be too damaged and lose the enchantment.

The new boots also lacked self-repair, but were very sturdy, even for a bronze-rank item. Most importantly, they replicated the most important functions of his old boots. The jumping power was even stronger than on his old boots, which had become a critical part of how he moved around. Added to his heightened, bronze-rank attributes, the new boots gave him more of exactly what he wanted. It was the final trait that was the true reason he made the switch, and without it, he would never have picked the new footwear. They colour-coordinated with his armour.

Belinda had done the best out of the entire team, largely because she could use such a wide array of gear. Her various abilities that replicated different roles each needed their

own gear set to have full effect. This was especially true given that she would never match up to a true specialised with her stop-gap powers.

She had purchased a variety of bare-bones equipment sets before they left, picked out with the aid of Gary's expert eye. She had sacrificed everything else at the altar of cost-effectiveness, giving her what Jason described as a 'quest reward hodge-podge' look. This was only exacerbated as she added items looted from their opponents, but the results had been worth the effort. She might look a bit unprofessional in her eclectic outfits, but her ability to be exactly what the team needed was stronger than ever.

The Builder's walled encampment was filled with screams.

"You did an impressive job arranging for so many to be converted at once with the available space," the Builder said.

"Thank you, Lord," Timos said. "I know that you like efficiency. I managed to create enough stations that all of our ritualists can be work simultaneously. It's grisly, but hardly the first place we've painted with blood."

"Things are moving quickly because this is their field of expertise," Zato said. "Our problems have all come from their needing to take on the astral magic duties after Landemere Vane was killed."

"That was a grave disappointment," Timos said. "I'd been cultivating him for years. I was quite pleased with how he'd turned out."

"There is more astral magic to be done," the Builder said. "Now I am here to direct things personally, however. All that is required is that they follow direction."

"That much I can assure you they are capable of," Zato said. "I made quite certain of that."

"The next obstacle is that the altered state of the ambient magic," the Builder said. "Naturally, I have the knowledge to compensate in activating the gates, but this vessel isn't powerful enough to open portals and transport our people around the astral space."

"Once the conversions are complete, we will be able to put together teams strong enough to navigate the dangers outside the walls. The need to physically travel to each location instead of just portalling is logistically more involved, but ultimately all it will cost us is time and a few casualties to monsters."

"And the Rejector," Timos added. "His team are coordinated and fearless. I escaped immediately and it was still enough time to see that. They are also powerful enough to deal with Hendren. Only the best bronze-rank teams could have done that."

Timos was still shaken by his encounter with Jason's team. Jason's spell that landed as Timos was fleeing had burned a symbol into Timos' face that the Builder had identified as the word 'sin,' from a symbolic language older than their world. The builder had to remove the curses before the light but prominent mark would heal.

"We will lose people to the Rejector," the Builder said, "but we hold the advantage. We still have the strength and we still have the numbers, while they do not have the luxury of staying hidden. They will be forced to climb out of their hole if they intend to understand what we are doing, let alone attempt to stop us."

Chapter 250

A Significantly More Dangerous Entity

The Builder was now wearing Thadwick's face, but those that knew him would spot the difference immediately. There was a very different beast inside Thadwick's body and the change was startling. It began from the eyes, hard and unyielding. This was a gaze that knew its domain was everything it landed upon. Person, place, or object, all that it saw, it owned.

It was a far cry from the insecure haughtiness of the body's former owner and his constant need for validation. Uncertain arrogance had been replaced with world-shaking confidence, transforming his entire demeanour. From facial expression to posture, Thadwick's body exuded the domineering presence that had ever been his unrealised intention.

The Builder walked alongside Zato and Timos as they inspected their new weapons, lined up like soldiers on parade. The former clergy stood with blank expressions, their personalities wiped clean. The souls inside were screaming, but only the Builder could hear them. He was no more moved by their suffering than was the brick under their feet.

Their clothes, torn and bloody from the involuntary procedure, had been replaced with plain garments. Around a third of them had grey-coloured clothes, the rest had brown. Their original clothes were gone, but their skin was still coated with the rust of dried blood. The cultists hadn't bothered to wash them off following the gruesome conversion process.

To ordinary senses, the converted seemed normal, aside from the empty, blank expressions. To magic and aura senses, they were anything but normal. There was no longer any trace of essence power within their auras, all burned as fuel for the magic intricately engraved all across their skeletons with the fine precision of circuitry. So stark was the power coursing over and through their bones that magical senses could clearly feel it, radiating through their flesh. The magic felt alien, unnatural and artificial, surging around their bodies and through the clockwork core implanted in their hearts. The cores were a modified variant of the cores used to create constructs, and were regulating the magic of the converted.

To aura sense, the converted projected a uniform, blank and sterile, bronze-rank aura, coming from what had once been iron-rank essence users. It was stronger from the brown-garbed individuals than those in the grey, but in both cases the auras being generated were firm and unfluctuating. Most disturbing was that the auras were identical amongst all those standing in line. The unique signature that was an intrinsic trait of all

auras was unsettlingly absent. There was no trace of their individuality or the suffering they were experiencing in deepest depths of their souls.

The procedure of emplacing the engravings had been painstaking and gruesome, carving them onto the skeleton directly and by hand. Flesh was peeled back and the engravings made, bone by bone, before the flesh was returned. Only the massively accelerated healing bestowed by the procedure made it possible for the subject to survive. Even then, moving on to the deeper bones that required more extreme procedures to access was a delicate balance.

It began with the least invasive areas, moving onto the more critical areas as more of the procedure was completed. By the time the ritualists were going for the hips, pelvis and spine, they had already walked a precarious balancing act to keep the subject alive at all. Paralysis magic was key in preventing any disruptive movement or screaming.

“Many of them had divine essences,” Timos said. “That power was not consumed by the process but returned to their god, so those ones are somewhat weaker. I’ve given the weaker ones grey garments and the stronger ones brown, to easily identify each group. My concern is that Purity will know the reason for this sudden return of power.”

“The god’s eyes do not extend to this place,” the Builder assured him. “All Purity will know is that his people died in rapid succession. There are dangers in this place that are plausible enough explanation. He will suspect, but not risk the alliance by pushing the issue. Show me the difference between the stronger and the lesser.”

Timos nodded at a pair of cultists standing by, who stepped forward. They moved up to two of the converted, one brown-garbed and one in grey. Each cultist drew a long knife and sliced open the throat of the converted in front of them, blood spraying from the wounds. The converted showed no reaction, and the gaping slashes quickly closed, with that of the brown-wearing converted happening faster than the other. It only took seconds for the savagely slashed throats to completely heal over, marked only by the blood that had spilled out.

“Adequate,” the Builder said. “Did we lose any in the conversion process?”

“We did not,” Timos said. “The ritualists were fastidious in their work.”

“Good. Having a vessel present gives me the ability to control them directly, but I cannot share their perceptions the way I can with those carrying star seeds. Begin organising them into teams with our people and the constructs. We begin the next stage in the morning. Now, show me my previous vessel.”

The team, now fully recovered, were discussing their next move.

“We need more information,” Humphrey said. “Did you get anything from what we took from Hendren, Clive?”

“No. In so far as I can tell, Hendren thought that this was just another astral space the Builder was trying to steal. There’s nothing about those giant golems or what the Builder might want with them.”

“When I was scouting their camp using Shade’s body, they looked to be gearing up to set out from their walled-off fort,” Jason said. “Whatever they’re doing, they can’t do it from where they are.”

“They probably need to go to the towers around the city, right?” Belinda said. “They have to be doing something with those world engineer things. Are they going to wake them up?”

“If they are,” Clive said. “I have to wonder what does the Builder gets out of that. Right now, they’re locked away in this astral space?”

“They’re diamond-rank,” Neil said. “For all we know, they’re powerful enough to leave this astral space using their own abilities.”

“I didn’t think of that,” Clive said. “You could well be right. The little I’ve learned about diamond rank has a recurring theme of the old rules no longer applying.”

“Maybe he isn’t looking to wake them up,” Belinda said. “Those towers are the anchor points tethering this astral space to our world, right? The portals linking it to our world are integrated right into them. What if their real purpose is some kind of delivery system. Rather than wake them up, he’s trying to move them into our world?”

“Whether they’re moving on their own steam or getting a push along, a dozen, diamond-ranked super-golems is not what we want floating about,” Jason said. “We may not know what they do, but with a name like world engineers, I think we really need to stop them from doing it.”

“Then what’s our next move?” Sophie asked.

“I hate to be passive, given what’s potentially at stake,” Jason said. “I don’t think we can just stage an attack on their fort, though. They have another silver-ranker, a small army of priests and cultists and however many of those construct creatures they’ve built. They also have the Builder itself. Do we have any idea how much power it has, or what it can do with that power? And by we, I mean Clive.”

“I don’t know,” Clive said. “Those walls it built are an impressive edifice, but you said it’s vessel looked more dead than alive. Most likely, that strained the vessel it’s occupying. You said you were sensing silver-rank magic from it?”

“Yes, although I couldn’t sense it at all until it was standing right in front of me. It seemed like silver-rank magic holding the body together, but I have no idea if that’s its limit.”

“Most likely,” Clive said. “A more powerful vessel would require a more powerful sacrifice and they don’t have a silver-ranker they can just toss away for that.”

“I think we can all agree that a pre-emptive attack would be ill-advised,” Humphrey said. “You’re counselling patience?”

“Yes,” Jason said. “We watch and we wait. When they make a move we look for a chance to dig out what they’re doing. Once we know what they’re up to and, hopefully, how, we can start figuring out how to stop it.”

“Does that mean we start hanging around the outside of the fort, waiting for them to come out?” Neil asked.

“I’ve already sent Shade to do exactly that,” Jason said. “He’ll be keeping a good distance, because we can’t be sure how sensitive the Builder’s senses are, but he’ll spot it if they make any big moves.”

Zato, Timos and the Builder walked past the array of construct creatures, most of which had been completed. Under normal circumstances, creating such creatures was a laborious and magic-intensive process. Access to clockwork cores made their construction cheap and relatively easy, for those with the expertise to use them. For the cult ritualists who specialised in their use, it was simplicity itself.

Clockwork core constructs were a cheap and dirty version of regular construct creatures. Those crafted through the usual process were a superior product, but the requirements in materials, time and facilities were considerable. The ability to quickly produce large numbers of constructs in the field, with no need for specialist workshops made clockwork core constructs more valuable than those that were, rank for rank, more powerful.

The only drawback to this approach was securing a supply of the clockwork cores. Without a clockwork king to produce more, the cultists were running increasingly short. The battles in the desert astral space and on their island base had cost them a vast number of the constructs, both destroyed outright and abandoned in the need to go to ground.

The constructs they were assembling now were consuming the last of their cores. Even the Builder itself was unable to produce new ones with its current vessel, which was not strong enough to endure the power it would take to create more.

Zato led the others past the constructs to where the Builder's previous vessel was in a cage made of magically-shaped stone. The cage was surrounded by an active magic circle, glowing with purple light. The vessel was visibly healthier than it had while possessed by the Builder, and while it was far from looking flush with life, it no longer had the appearance of a weeks-old corpse.

The reason for its recovery was not just the absence of the Builder's power eating it away from the inside but also the dead bronze-rank priests piled up in the cage. It had fed on them all for the sustenance it needed to survive. Feeding, however, had not let it move beyond the animalistic instincts it had been left with on the Builder's departure for a new shell. The intelligence of the man it had once been was nowhere in evidence. Crouched in the cage, it stared at them, warily.

"What exactly does it feed on?" Timos asked. "My understanding is that the soul is inviolable. I cannot imagine this feral creature having the skill of you, Lord, at forcing people to yield that barrier.

"While it is commonly accredited as feeding on the soul, that is not what energy vampires do," the Builder explained. "They are also, strictly speaking, not vampires. They are more akin to ghouls; wretched things that know nothing but hunger. They do attack the soul, which disrupts the magical matrix that governs the physical body, and they feed on this disturbed magic."

"It can't truly feed on souls, then," Timos said.

"It could, if given the chance. When such a creature does find a way to feed on a soul, that power is transformative. The ghoul truly does become a form of vampire; a significantly more dangerous entity. Such chances are rare, however."

"And it won't go after monsters," Timos said.

"No," the Builder confirmed. "It requires a true soul to trigger a reaction that disrupts the body's flow of magic. The false souls of monsters barely react to such attacks, making them poor sustenance."

"So it won't go after the monsters," Zato said, "but what of the twisted flesh creatures that inhabit this astral space? Are their souls damaged enough for the ghoul to ignore them?"

"There were hundreds of them, according to our agents in the Adventure Society," Timos said. "One of the last reports before our people had to withdraw from their positions was that the Rejector intended to wipe the flesh creatures out."

“They have likely thinned out the numbers in their time here,” Zato said. “I can’t imagine they eliminated them all, under the conditions here, but hopefully there are few enough left that it isn’t an issue and the ghoul seeks out the Rejector.”

“Souls that have been significantly altered create an unusual reaction in the body’s magic, which taints it to such ghouls,” the Builder said. “It is the same reason it might attack you, but cannot feed off of you. The alterations I have made to your soul make you poisonous to it. The flesh creatures are similar and it will not go after them.”

“The ghoul should go right for the Rejector, then, once it catches wind of him,” Zato said.

“Yes. The flesh creatures will not be concern,” the Builder said. “What will be a concern to us are the vorger that created the flesh creatures in the first place. They would not be so foolish as to come anywhere near me, but once our teams move out, the vorger will move in on them.”

“I’ll make sure that each team contains people capable of handling incorporeal pests,” Timos said.

“Good,” Zato said. “Lord, do you wish to release this energy ghoul now?”

“Yes,” the Builder said.

“I shall have our ritualists securely remove it from the fort.”

“No need,” the Builder said. “I shall deal with it myself.”

The Builder strode through the magic circle, which flickered and dimmed as it passed over it. Nearing the cage, the magically-moulded bars started to run like mud, quickly thinning to an almost watery consistency and splashing onto the brickwork, where it immediately hardened again.

The ghoul leapt at the Builder, who snatched it out of the air with one hand, claspng its fingers around the ghoul’s neck. The ghoul collapsed in his grip, falling limp like a rag. The Builder then carried it to the nearest gate in the wall, which opened at his approach. The builder tossed out the ghoul, which regained its senses in the air, twisting into an animalistic catfall. It looked back, fearfully, before scrambling away, still of all fours.

The Builder raised a hand and dust started rising up from the ground, swirling together into a small but solid shape. It was a crystal eyeball with spider legs that, immediately on being completed, scurried off after the ghoul.

Chapter 251

Losing the Battle to Win the War

Jason dashed forward, his sword flicking out.

“Faster,” Sophie said, catching every strike with her hand as she moved backwards, easily matching the pace of Jason’s advance.

“You don’t need to hit hard,” she said. “If you’re going to fight the constructs effectively, it’s about building up the power on your sword as quickly as possible.”

Fending off Jason’s attacks while moving backwards at speed was apparently not strenuous enough to make her incapable of carrying on conversation. They had chosen rough terrain on purpose, with undergrowth, vines and plants growing up through displaced brickwork. Sophie navigated it easily, without even looking around.

Her perception power, the only one on the team yet to provide magical senses, gave her an advanced form of spatial awareness. Each member of the team experienced a similar gain in spatial awareness, just from their senses advancing to bronze, but hers was an order of magnitude greater. It was the difference navigating a well-known room in the dark and moving through it with the lights on.

More than just navigating whatever space she happened to occupy, Sophie’s senses made her far better at reading the attacks of enemies. She could track the movements of everyone around her, intercepting attacks she could feel, even if she couldn’t see them.

Jason had experienced a surge in his combat skills between his bronze-rank attributes and the new Way of the Reaper techniques that made the most of them. For Sophie, though, reaching bronze-rank was putting wings on a tiger. Like Humphrey, her combat skills were the platform on which her entire power set was balanced, and being stronger faster and more aware of her surroundings were acting as force multipliers to her capabilities.

For Jason’s power set, by comparison, strategic movement was more critical than combat technique. Being in the right place at the right time was the most important factor in making the most of his abilities and the balance of his training reflected that. Since many of those powers would be ineffective against the cult’s constructs, however, he would be reliant on his sword. For that reason, Humphrey and Sophie were taking turns helping him hone his swordsmanship.

As with most things, Jason’s approach to swordsmanship was slightly off-kilter to most people. As with his knife-fighting style, quantity of hits was more important than quality. He didn’t need powerful strikes but frequent ones, to build up the power on his

sword. He did actually need to land hits, not just harmless taps, but even the least effective blow would get the job done, so long as it was effective at all.

With the bronze-rank advancement, the sword would not just build up charges with each hit. It would also leave behind ongoing damage effects, bringing it more into line with Jason's normal style, although not as effectively as his normal powers. While that meant diminished capability, Jason was quietly relieved that his entire worth couldn't be replicated by a single, albeit impressive, magic item.

"Mr Asano," Shade said, emerging from Jason's shadow. Jason and Sophie brought their practise to a stop.

"There's been some activity?" Jason asked.

"It would seem that the Builder has moved to its new vessel," Shade said. "Unexpectedly, it did not kill of the previous one, but threw it out of the fortress immediately."

Jason and Sophie had been practising just outside the church building containing the cloud house. As Shade talked, they made their way back inside to meet with the team.

"The Builder's vessel survived having the Builder in it?" Jason asked.

"It's a little more complicated than that," Shade said.

"Well, wait on an explanation until we meet up with the team," Jason said. It was not long before the team were gathered in the lounge room of the cloud house.

"What are we dealing with?" Humphrey asked.

"The Builder's previous vessel," Shade said. "The Builder's new one, the former Mr Mercer, cast it out of the fortified camp in person."

"What kind of state is it in?" Jason asked. "I didn't think it would survive."

"It won't have, strictly speaking," Clive explained. "It'll be an energy ghoul, now; an undead thing only kept animate by residual magic. Little, if any of the original mind will be intact."

"It was acting in a very animalistic manner," Shade said.

"The magic sustaining it won't last long," Clive said. "It will need more to avoid going from undead to just plain dead."

"What kind of magic?" Belinda asked.

"The kind flowing through all of us," Clive said. "We've discussed in the past about how the bodies of anyone, iron-rank or higher, move closer and closer to a generic magical substance that it shapes as need. The magic involved in that process is governed by the soul. An energy ghoul feeds by disrupting that magic with a soul attack, then consuming it."

“Why did the Builder throw this thing out, instead of just putting it down?” Jason asked. “Won’t it be a threat to their people?”

“The cultists all have souls poisoned by their star seeds,” Clive said. “The Purity church people will be vulnerable to it, however.”

“Which the cult may not care about, now the leader of the church contingent is dead,” Humphrey said. “The Builder may not care about what they have to contribute, now they aren’t providing a silver-ranker.”

“I believe that we can surmise the church’s contribution,” Shade said. “The former vessel was in an improved condition, compared to when Mr Asano and myself met with the Builder.”

“He’s been feeding the church people to it?” Jason asked. “That’s a bad ally to have.”

“A great astral being is one of the few that do not need fear a god’s retribution,” Clive said. “The gods of our world can’t see into this astral space, because it isn’t part of our world. So long as none of Purity’s people come back alive, the Builder can just blame all the deaths on us.”

“I’m happy to do my part,” Sophie said. “I’ll kill them all with a smile on my face.”

“Sophie!” Belinda scolded. “Since when do you smile?”

The team stifled laughs at Sophie’s affronted expression.

“Let’s keep on topic,” Humphrey said, despite the poor job he was doing of schooling amusement from his own face. “How dangerous is this thing?”

“Was it a silver-rank aura?” Clive asked Shade.

“Yes,” Shade said. “Its aura is unstable, but quite violent.”

“And that’s the real threat,” Clive said. “The physical danger it poses is relatively small, akin to an ordinary, silver-rank monster. No additional powers, not even claws. Just the silver-rank attributes.”

“Relatively small,” Jason said. “You haven’t gone toe-to-toe with a silver-rank monster. Just the attributes is plenty dangerous enough.”

“But not something beyond your ability to handle alone,” Clive said, “which is the important thing. If it can suppress our auras, it will launch a soul attack. We’ve seen the results of that courtesy of you, Jason. We can most likely withstand it, but you’re the only one of us likely to hold up well enough to remain combat effective. The rest will have to focus on maintaining our aura integrity.”

“That puts it all on Jason,” Humphrey said. “Are you up for that?”

“I’ll have to be,” Jason said. “I still don’t understand what the Builder is looking to accomplish in feeding this thing up and sending it off. What does he get from doing that?”

“An energy ghoul is incredibly sensitive to the life and soul magic. It also ignores monsters, because it can’t feed on them effectively.”

“He wants to use it to find us,” Sophie said.

“That seems likely,” Clive said. “It’s not a bad idea, either. It probably won’t even take that long to find us. It’s movements will be erratic until it catches our trail. Not an actual trail, but a sense of our magic. Once it does, it’ll make a beeline, right for us.”

“I have one of my bodies following it,” Shade said. “It is making a straight line, but not in our direction.”

“I think Mr Standish may be incorrect in counting the soul attack as the largest danger the energy ghoul presents,” Shade said. “Following the ghoul is a small scouting construct created by the Builder. The moment we engage with the ghoul, the Builder will know.”

“It seems that you were right, Clive,” Humphrey said. “The Builder is using this thing to flush us out.”

“It makes sense,” Neil said. “If you have it laying about, why not throw it at us? It’s kind of wasting a soul-sucking monster, otherwise.”

“It’s not an actual monster,” Clive said. “And it doesn’t actually ‘suck souls.’ It would if it could, but souls are inviolable. You can’t just crack them like a breakfast egg. No one is going to open themselves up to an energy ghoul, which is for the best, given the result.”

“The result of what?” Humphrey asked.

“Well, if it actually managed to consume a soul, it would transform into a soul vampire. Much more powerful, much more dangerous. We don’t have to worry about that, though.”

“Why not?” Neil asked.

“I told you; soul’s are inviolable,” Clive said. “It’s not like there’s an unattended soul just laying about for it to eat. Why are you all staring at me?”

“An unattended soul,” Neil said.

“Exactly,” Clive said. “Where would it possibly find one of those?”

“About eight kilometres away,” Jason said.

“What?” Clive asked.

“The one wrapped around the sword, remember?” Neil asked and Clive’s eyes went wide and he leapt out of his chair.

“Oh, that’s bad” he said. “That’s really, really bad. We can’t let that happen. Especially not a soul that powerful.”

He started pacing back and forth.

“Maybe its fine,” Clive said. “Maybe whatever’s been done to that soul will make in intolerable to the ghoul. It’ll just ignore it.”

“Right now, the ghoul is moving in almost a straight line in the direction of the location you are discussing,” Shade said. “So long as you leave in the next several minutes, you will be able to comfortably intercept the ghoul.”

“Why didn’t you say that before?” Clive asked Shade wildly.

“I largely avoid embroiling myself in the affairs of the great astral beings,” Shade said. “My affiliation with the Reaper tends to cause complications. As such, I am unfamiliar with the specifics around taking mortal vessels and their subsequent condition.”

“Then we need to move,” Humphrey said. “I can only imagine that letting the ghoul consume that soul is trouble enough, let alone unleashing the sword it imprisons.”

“Double the trouble,” Jason said.

“Are we sure this whole thing isn’t a trap?” Sophie asked. “Does the Builder know about the sword and is baiting us into trying to stop the ghoul?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Clive said. “We have to stop it even if we know for certain it’s a trap. A soul that powerful might even let the ghoul rise up to a gold-rank soul vampire. If that happens, I don’t see us leaving this place alive, let alone stopping the Builder.”

The Builder, Zato and Timos were preparing to exit the walled fortress with an assembled group of cultists, constructs and converted Purity priests.

“You have a concern, Timos?” the Builder asked.

“I don’t feel it’s appropriate to say, Lord Builder.”

“Speak, Timos.”

“It’s just... that face,” Timos said. “I spent more time than I would care to, holding Thadwick Mercer’s leash. It’s still a little odd seeing his face without his unique mix of vacuousness, insecurity and disdain.”

“I always find that obtaining the memories of a vessel to be interesting,” the Builder said. “Very few things are difficult to a transcendent being, but obtaining a mortal perspective is one of them. It makes predicting mortal behaviour difficult. So often you make choices that objectively work against your own interests or are even self-destructive.”

“If that’s what you’re looking for, I don’t think you could have found a better vessel,” Timos said. “Thadwick Mercer was a disaster of self-sabotage.”

“Indeed,” the Builder said. “I was hoping for some insight into the Rejector, but this vessel was so self-deluded that I don’t entirely trust the memories.”

The Builder tilted its head, as if listening to something.

“The ghoul is moving with speed and purpose,” it said. “It has been attracted to something.”

“The Rejector’s team,” Timos said. “Perhaps they were nearby, scouting the fortress.”

“I’ll take some of our forces and capture them,” Zato said.

“No,” the Builder said. “Rushing to the attack is what cost us Hendren, but there is no benefit in losing you. Send a force of converted and constructs under the command of one of the bronze-rankers.”

“I’ll arrange it, Lord, but I am uncertain they will find success against a group that already defeated a silver-ranker.”

“They will not,” the Builder said. “That is not the purpose of sending them. The mobility of being a small group is their key advantage against us. Rushing out to attack each time we catch wind of them only plays to that strength. One of our advantages in numbers and it is time to make use of them.”

“Please enlighten me, Lord,” Zato said.

“I will send observers with this force. We shall see how the Rejector and his team fights them, that we might develop countermeasures for future encounters. All it will cost us is a small portion of our superior numbers.”

“Planting the seeds of victory in the soil of defeat. My Lord is wise and long-sighted.”

“Don’t be a sycophant, Zato. I am not a god, in need of fawning worshippers.”

“Apologies, Lord Builder.”

Since the leap in Jason’s aura power after his encounter with the Builder’s star seed, Jason had been engaging the team in anti-suppression training. He couldn’t raise the strength of their aura, but they could train to make the most of the strength they had. By keeping their aura projection uniform and resolute, they would present no weakness for the ghoul’s aura to pounce on and collapse their auras entirely, leaving them exposed to its feeding ability.

This paid off when they encountered the ghoul, who immediately let out a soul-piercing shriek to go with its soul-suppressing aura. Aside from Jason, the team were all staggered, but not debilitated. Jason himself plunged forward, undaunted.

The encounter happened in amongst tightly-packed buildings, the jungle overgrowth turning narrow streets into cramped canyons. Vines covered the walls and trees on the rooftops formed a canopy that stretched over the streets and cast everything in shadow.

The ghoul was a ragged, wretched thing, its clothes torn and bloody. Even though it was more intact than when Jason had seen it as the builder's vessel, he saw even less of the man he remembered.

Dougall had been the one to capture him, in what felt like a lifetime ago back at the Vane Estate. It had only been a just a few months more than a year ago, but Jason was literally and figuratively transformed. He had been scared and confused, halfway to madness and not entirely certain he wasn't the whole way there. Scrambling to survive, let alone understand what was happening to him, the repeated hits to the head with a shovel did not help.

The man who had been holding that shovel had undergone an even greater transformation than Jason, although not for the better. A less than pleasant man in life, undeath had rendered him into an even more unpleasant monstrosity.

The ghoul was silver-rank, but without the power to penetrate Jason's aura, it was no more threat than its silver-rank attributes, themselves on the lower end of the scale. It fought unthinkingly and without skill, while the environment was a playground for Jason's abilities. His affliction powers were able to shine against the creature's silver-rank fortitude, hardy enough to withstand far more punishment than any bronze-ranker. The escalating nature of Jason's afflictions proved their worth as they inevitably overwhelmed the ghoul.

With the enclosed space and the team concentrating on fending off the ghoul's aura, they had not detected the presence of the builder's forces until they were almost upon them. Even as Jason's execute was annihilating the ghoul, the team heard the approach of the clunky stone constructs.

Chapter 252

War of Adaptation

The enemy force only had a few cultists, being mostly made up of constructs and the converted. They hadn't even engaged Jason's team before being thrown into confusion as Belinda used her Unexpected Allies spell. The team were masked in illusions that made them appear as members of the enemy force. Illusionary doubles of their true form appeared as allies and enemies alike were switch-teleported around the area by Belinda's spell.

The enemy constructs were unthinking automatons and the converted former clergy weren't much better. Neither handled the confusing shift in the battlefield well. When the team attacked them under the disguise of illusion, they retaliated against what appeared to be members of their own force.

The illusionary disguises weren't very good and most of the team was easy to pick out. Humphrey, for example, had taken the form of one of the blank-faced converted, but was still wielding his huge dragon sword. The mindless enemy, however, was easily deceived. Once they thought their own forces were attacking them, things got very messy, very fast.

The cultists commanding the forces worked to get things back under control as their forces started fighting one another. It helped that the illusions did not last long and their enemies once again became clear. Jason and his team had used that window of confusion to maximum effect.

The team was well-practised in handling the chaos of Belinda's power and had used the moment of confusion to set themselves up for the fight against an enemy in disarray. The priority was getting the team's backline out of harm's way, Sophie and Humphrey immediately moving to clear paths for Clive and Neil to escape the fray. Belinda activated her Counterfeit Champion power, equipped some hefty equipment and started extracting herself.

After the random switch-teleport by Belinda, Jason had found himself in the midst of constructs. They ranged from larger than him to much larger than him, in a myriad of monstrous forms. Rather than wasting the precious moments of enemy confusion looking for more fleshy opponents, he drew his sword and put his recent training into practise. Shade's bodies spread out between them, giving Jason plenty of flexibility for shadow teleports and he made the most of them. He moved amongst the constructs like a ghost, his sword dancing to make rapid-fire hits in staccato rhythm.

With the aid of Sophie and Humphrey, Clive and Neil extricated themselves from the scrum, heading for the reliable presence of Onslow, who had been unconvincingly disguised as one of the larger constructs. Neil's Burst Shield proved especially effective in getting them clear.

Ability: [Burst Shield] (Shield)

- Special ability (healing, recovery)
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 20 seconds.

- Current rank: Bronze 3 (87%).

- Effect (Iron): Create a short-lived shield that negates an incoming attack and explodes out, knocking-back nearby enemies and inflicting concussive damage. High-damage attacks of silver-rank or higher may not be entirely negated.

- Effect (Bronze): Inflicts [Vibrant Echo] on anyone damaged by the blast.

- [Vibrant Echo] (affliction, damage-over-time, magic): Inflicts ongoing resonating-force damage.

The enemy started getting back into order, the converted pooling into one group and the constructs into another, with the few ordinary cultists at the back. Sophie moved against the concentration of converted, the blank-faced former clergy all fighting back in eerily identical manner. They had the same strength, the same speed, the same technique, all used in the same way. They fought with the same, emotionless expression.

The converted were fast and skilled, moving in a manner that was rigid, yet swift and efficient. They didn't have weapons but their bones were hard as steel, their knuckles, knees and elbows making effective bludgeons. They used those weapons startlingly well for clergy, all fighting with the same expertise and identical technique.

The converted had the technique of a someone who had learned it from a skill book without ever attempting to make those techniques their own. The skill was undoubtedly present but they fought without creativity or initiative. They were slaves to the patterns, with neither innovation nor imagination on display. It did not take long for Sophie to see through the patterns and start exploiting them.

If they weren't up against Sophie, the efficient, robotic movements of the converted might have seemed like a precision machine. Instead, they came across as the crude prototype of her finished product. Even compared to their programmed, uniform efficiency, Sophie was faster, cleaner and even more economical of motion. Every motion was

smooth, not so much as a gesture wasted as every action flowed into the next. She danced through her opponents as if the whole fight had been choreographed but she was the only one who knew.

Sophie moved swiftly, holding the attention of as many of the converted as she could while they attempted to overrun her. What they lacked in imagination they made for in sheer numbers. Their fortitude, and regenerative power meant that she couldn't take any of them out completely, forced to perpetually hold them off as they kept coming in a relentless tide.

Even with her skill, Sophie could not have handled the numbers without support. Clive and Neil threw spells on her, with Neil's Burst Shield spell regularly clearing space and buying her critical breathing room.

Having seen Neil and Clive regroup at the rear and join up with Belinda, Humphrey went for the cultists commanding the force. There were only three bronze-rankers, mediocre cultists that were no match for Humphrey even three on one. They were sent staggering by his fire breath before quickly falling to his sword.

Ability: [Fire Breath] (Dragon)

- **Special attack**
- **Cost: Very high mana.**
- **Cooldown: 50 seconds.**

- **Current rank: Bronze 3 (65%).**
- **Effect (Iron): Breath a stream of fire that last several seconds.**
- **Effect (Bronze): Anyone damaged by the flames suffers ongoing fire damage.**

Frowning at the suspicious ease with which they were taken down, he surveyed the battlefield, looking for what he was missing. He spotted a number of strange glass eyes, held off the ground on spider legs, watching the fight. When he went after them, they skittered away before he could close the distance. In the jungle confines, there was plenty of space to hide, and though he could sense their magic, he didn't have time to go digging them out.

"Humphrey," Jason said through voice chat. "I could use an assist."

Jason was oddly thriving amongst the constructs. They were large and tough, hulking stone forms in the shape of various, strange monsters. The constructs were milling about like a bunch of people trying to stomp out a scurrying bug, but their intimidating and bulky forms didn't help them pin down the shadowy figure flittering in their midst. Jason was ever

on the move, his sword ringing out on the stone in a rat-a-tat pattern. His sword had built up enough power that chunks of stone were flying off with every strike.

Although Jason's efforts were going well, that did not make them easy. The biggest problem was the lone silver-rank construct amongst the otherwise bronze-ranker group. It was faster than the others and tough enough that Jason's sword was yet to pick up enough power to damage it effectively. Unlike Jason himself, his sword did not have the ability to overcome silver-rank resistances.

Although no smarter than the others, it remained a constant threat that Jason had to continuously work around. If he had been fighting it alone he could have handled it, but on top of the others it was pressuring his ability to remain evasive.

The intercession of Humphrey changed that significantly. Like taking a sledgehammer to a condemned building, he laid into it with workmanlike special attacks, breaking it apart in huge chunks.

"You want to go help Sophie and leave this lot to me?" Humphrey asked as the silver-rank construct collapsed.

"I could use the practise," Jason said. "You go."

In the midst of the converted, Sophie was ramping up. They had been slowly overwhelming her from the beginning, their numbers and near-indestructibility made it like trying to fight back the tide. Even Sophie's skill was not enough to go unscathed against so many attackers, but she was realising that taking a few hits was not so bad, as long as she wasn't staggered and pinned-down. With every hit, her Karmic Warrior ability increased her power, allowing her to hold up all the better.

Humphrey joined in but even his destructive power was hard-pressed to take down the converted. Their flesh wasn't as tough as the stone constructs, but their bones were harder than metal. It turned out, as Humphrey started tearing them apart with special, that metal was indeed laced through their skeletons in thick wires. Worse, those wires could even snake out to reconnect, pulling dismembered body parts back together as their rapid healing knitted the flesh back into place.

The converted only presented a limited danger individually, but they were too dangerous to ignore and their ability to rapidly recover from what should have been catastrophically lethal injury meant that they just kept coming. Only by entirely pulverising the bulk of their bodies with his special attacks could even Humphrey put an end to them, but he had special attacks to spare.

Without the cultists guiding them, the team entered a mop-up phase as they cleared the battlefield.

“I wouldn’t call this easy, exactly,” Jason said, once they were done, “but did anyone find this suspiciously lacking in challenge?”

“I believe the purpose is to test us,” Shade said. “Rather than any of his more capable people, this group was accompanied by the Builder’s observer constructs.”

“You mean those spider eye things?” Humphrey asked. “I spotted those but couldn’t catch any of them.”

“These things?” Sophie asked, holding one up by the leg. “They seem harmless, so they’re probably just for watching us.”

The main body was an, oversized, crystal eye, around half the size of a fist. Legs came out from the sides like those of a spider, made of a smoky quartz stone. Jason moved closer, peering into it.

“You in there, mate?” Jason asked. “You and I weren’t exactly being honest with one another, the last time we met. You were stalling to try and find me; I was baiting your henchpeople into a trap. I’m not saying I won, but you’re down a silver-ranker and I’m up a nice personal grooming set he had on him. Keeps the beard nice and trim, you know.”

“Jason, what are you doing?” Sophie asked.

“I’m talking to my mate Bill,” Jason said. “Just keep holding up the thing. Sorry about that, Bill. That’s the problem when you lease your slaves. The moment the lease runs out, they get all mouthy.”

“Hey!”

“Shush, you. Anyway, Bill, I’m not completely on board with this whole ‘probing attacks’ scenario. I’ve made a career out of taking on the kind of self-destructive idiots whose bad choices are more of a danger to themselves than I ever was. That’s the kind of enemy that’s in my wheelhouse, so if you could go ahead and make a rash decision that sows the seeds of your own downfall, that’d really help me out.”

“Jason...” Humphrey said.

“Sorry, Bill; they’re playing me off. Got to go, but you keep an eye out. Rumour is that there’s some lunatic super-god running around causing trouble. I’ve heard he’s kind of a prick.”

Sophie shook her head, then swung the observer drone into the ground, shattering the crystal eye.

“Can’t have them following us around,” she said. “We need to catch and destroy them all before we can make ourselves scarce.”

Around half of the Builder's combat forces had been led in an excursion outside walled fortress. The remainder staying behind with the support personnel. Leading the excursion was the Builder himself, along with Timos and Zato.

Zato looked on with concern as the Builder suddenly stopped. The vessel's face never showed emotion, so he was startled to see a very human expression of anger cross it.

"Lord Builder?"

"Notebook," the Builder demanded and Zato took one from his dimensional satchel. The Builder ran a finger over the pages, which stained themselves with text as he did. After filling most of the book, he handed it to Timos.

"Once we return to the fort, have the ritualists create new constructs with these parameters," the Builder said. "It will be more difficult, but it is hardly a taxing task. There are also changes listed that can be made to the existing constructs. Not as effective as those purpose-built, but an improvement, nonetheless."

"Of course, Lord Builder. I hesitate to mention it, but the ritualists have pointed out to me in the past that the supply of clockwork cores is almost exhausted."

"If they wish to complain about my allocation of resources, tell them that they may seek me out directly," the Builder said.

"I believe that will settle the matter definitely, Lord Builder."

"Adaptations for the Rejector's team?" Zato asked.

"Yes," the Builder said. "Even having some sense of their capabilities, they made surprisingly short work of our forces. They have weaknesses, however, that are ripe for exploitation."

"They will inevitably give us the chance," Zato said.

"Yes," the Builder said. "For the moment, we put them aside. They are a distraction from our true objective."

The excursion moved to the very centre of the city, not far from the walls of their fort. Circumstances had forced them into erecting the wall on the spot that had arrived, otherwise the Builder would have already led them to the city's true heart. The crater that had once been the site of the Order of the Reaper's tower left the Builder unfazed.

"The time has come," the Builder said, "for the Rejector to see just who he has challenged and to whom this place truly belongs."

The Builder held out his arms, making a rising gesture. The ground beneath tier feet stated to shake.

“Why would the Builder just throw people away like that?” Neil asked.

The team were back in the cloud house, discussing the fight they just had.

“Because we beat Hendren,” Humphrey said. “He’s assessing us. Looking for weaknesses. He presumably has some means of making his forces stronger. Probably through the constructs, since they can make those.”

“The converted will adapt as well,” Shade said.

“The converted?” Sophie asked. “You mean those weird people with the blank faces that refused to die?”

“Yes,” Shade said. “They are one of the Builder’s signatures.”

“They’re an atrocity,” Clive said. “I could see the magic running through them. Magic carved right onto their bones.”

“I’ve heard of that,” Jason said. “Isn’t that how they permanently suppress someone’s powers? Turn their own skeleton into a suppression collar?”

“Yes,” Clive said. “A practise I don’t particularly approve of, and this is the same thing on a much deeper and more comprehensive scale. There’s nothing of the original person left. They’re just a platform for the Builder’s power and will.”

“An excellent description,” Shade said. “Those we encountered today were fresh. Over time, they will change, adapt new abilities.”

“Abilities tailored to fight us,” Neil said.

“Yes,” Shade said. “Normally they adapt somewhat randomly, but with the Builder’s vessel present to guide the changes, you can expect them to be better equipped to fight us the next time.”

“It was hard enough this time,” Sophie said. “Those things will get stronger?”

“We’ve seen enemies that adapt before,” Humphrey said. “We killed those flesh abominations by the hundreds, in spite of their adaptations. If the Builder wants to adjust to us, we adjust faster. That’s our strength and we’re going to show him that in a war of adaptation, we’re going to win.”

“Easy enough to say,” Neil said.

“We start by picking our roles. Jason did a surprisingly good job against the constructs but they are only going to get stronger.”

“Surprisingly?” Jason asked, his voice filled with exaggerated affront.

“I’m well-suited to the constructs,” Humphrey continued, “so that will be my job. Those converted are tough and heal fast, like the flesh abominations. So, as with the flesh abominations, Jason will be our trump card there. I’m willing to bet they can’t out-heal your

afflictions. Sophie will do what she does best, which is judging where she needs to be in the moment and being there.”

“That’s going to be the key,” Jason said. “Even if the Builder can reconfigure his constructs between fights and evolve his creepy thugs, we can adapt in moments.”

“Exactly right,” Humphrey said. “Belinda, you’re our most versatile player, so we’re going to rely on you. Clive, you’re in charge of taking out the big threats, or at least hitting them hard enough to take pause. Neil, you’ll do what you always do. Keep us alive.”

Humphrey looked around the room.

“We’ve been tested, again and again in this place. Every time, we’ve grown stronger. The Builder might think this place belongs to him, but it belongs to us. This is our crucible and it has given us the strength to beat him. We can handle anything he can throw at us, whatever that might be.”

Just as he finished speaking, the ground started to shake violently enough that they could feel it through the soft cushioning of the cloud house.

Chapter 253

The Hero of This Story

“Should we be getting out?” Sophie asked as the cloud house continued to shake.

“What if the church collapses on top of the cloud house?”

The cloud house was still hidden in the huge internal space of a cathedral.

“At most, it would be the roof falling on us,” Clive said. “That’s not enough to breach the cloud house, especially now it’s been upgraded to bronze-rank.”

“Yep,” Jason said. “We go out there and the first thing that happens is we fall on the ground. The second thing that happens is the ground falls on us.”

The shaking continued for more than a minute before settling down. The team opened the door to find it blocked by debris, but Jason just concentrated and a new door opened elsewhere on the wall. They made their way outside, finding the church half-collapsed. The nearby buildings had likewise suffered extensive damage, already weakened by age and the intrusive jungle growth.

Jason pulled out his cloud flask, into which the cloud house started returning.

“What do you think it was?” Neil asked, looking around. “Oh, I’ve spotted it.”

The others followed his pointed arm with their gaze, seeing the giant tower reaching into the sky. It looked to be in the centre of the city, taller than any building Jason had seen since leaving his own world. He estimated it to be somewhere between twenty-five and thirty storeys tall, made of the same stone as the rest of the city but untouched by jungle growth. There were windows around the outside but they couldn’t see inside at their current distance.

“Was that thing underground, or did the Builder just make it?” Belinda wondered aloud.

“If he did,” Clive said, “then he must have burned that vessel to a cinder. That tower would take far more power to create than knocking up some walls.”

“I think that might not be all,” Jason said.

Jason had received a system message right as the rumbling had come to an end.

➤ [Mapped areas of your current region are out of date. Visit affected areas to update details.](#)

Jason pulled up his map. The whole city had been revealed over their months in the astral space, but now a series of areas were once more occluded. Worrying, but

unsurprising, were their locations. Along with the former site of the Order of the Reaper's tower, was the towers around the city's edge and the golem hidden within.

"Something has changed at the towers around the city as well," Jason said and told the others about the changes to his map. As it was a separate ability to his party interface, he was unable to share it with the team except for Belinda. She could mimic it by shapeshifting into Jason's form.

"What do we do now?" Sophie asked. "Do we go and scout this new tower?"

"The cult forces will almost certainly be gathered there," Humphrey said. "I'm hesitant to make that move without a plan or objective."

"Why don't we take a look at the towers around the city?" Belinda suggested. "If the cult is going to them, they either need to split their forces or go through them one at a time."

"Meaning that we either run into a group we can handle, or don't run into them at all," Humphrey said. "I like it. I just hope that whatever we find there can finally let us figure out what the Builder is doing."

"That seems likely," Clive said. "Anything to do with those world engineer golems in the towers has to be on a grandiose scale."

"I think that qualifies," Neil said, glancing up at the tower looming over the city centre. "You don't suppose that there's an even bigger golem inside that tower?"

"It'd be an awfully skinny golem," Jason said.

"I really doubt the Builder just stone-shaped that tower into being," Clive said. "I think it's magical infrastructure that's been hidden this whole time."

"That's not even a surprise, at this point," Sophie said. "Add it to the absurd list of secrets in this place."

"If I can take a look at some of that infrastructure," Clive continued, "then maybe we can figure out how to top it."

"Something this large and this involved has to have a bunch of potential failure points," Jason said.

"Exactly," Clive said.

"Well then," Humphrey said. "Let's go looking for them."

It was a relatively short journey from the original walled fort to the new tower the Builder had caused to rise up from the crater at the heart of the city. Buried deep below where the Reaper's tower had stood for centuries, the new tower proclaimed the new dominant force in the astral space.

The remainder of the Builder's forces and resources were moving from the fort to the tower, where they were occupying the bottom floors. There had space enough for all of their people, especially with the teams that had already been sent off in the direction of the towers around the edges of the city. It also had defences enough that it would take a concerted effort by powerful monsters to threaten it.

"Do you think the Rejector will come here?" Zato asked. He and Timos were on the third floor of the tower looking out a window. It was the highest floor the cultists were occupying. Even they were unsure of what was contained above, having been forbidden from going higher by the Builder.

"It's hard to know," Timos said. He had been one of the cult's ringleaders in Greenstone and knew more about what had gone on there than most of the cult. He had been present for the Rejector's rise to prominence, although he only knew so much. By the time the Rejector's true fame came about, Timos had been driven from the city by Thalia Mercer and her obsessive purge.

"Asano is famously hard to predict," Timos said. "The things I've heard are strange and contradictory. Coming here would be foolish but he's made foolish choices before."

"I don't think he will," Zato said. "The Lord Builder believes that he will attempt to sabotage the towers."

"Is that even possible?" Timos asked.

"The Lord Builder told me that he has taken steps to ensure that the Rejector makes the attempt. Once he encounters one of our teams at a tower, though, the new adapted response teams will move to the adjacent towers to intercept them when they move to complete what they think is sabotage."

"They're completed already?"

"The ritualist team have been doing well since we moved them from astral magic work to their actual area of expertise," Zato said. "They have not only finished the new constructs but modified the old ones as well. As for the converted, the Builder made those changes personally."

Before the team reached the closest of the city's exterior towers, they stopped to let Jason and Sophie scout ahead. What they found was that the tower remained intact, with no discernable changes. Like all the towers, it abutted right against the water that ringed the city, but now there was a new feature.

A second tower was now present, around a dozen metres directly off shore from the first. It was a mirror of the existing tower, aside from a lack of the portal archway on the

top. In its place was some kind of plinth. They couldn't make out details, but they could see a magical glow shining from it.

A stone pathway had also arisen to form a bridge from the base of the original tower to the new one, leading to stairs spiralling up, around the outside. These had already been used by the two cultists they could see atop the tower. They had a single construct with them and a handful of converted. It was a small force, barely enough to make their way through a city infested with monsters now travelling in herds.

"Why so few?" Sophie wondered as she and Jason watched from a nearby rooftop.

"They have numbers, but they aren't infinite," Jason said. "If Shade is right, most of their force are those converted, now. They would have sacrificed all their iron-rankers to make them because iron-rankers are no good here."

"You think the Builder just sent a few to minimise his losses, wherever we turned up?"

"Or it's a trap," Jason said. "Shade is scouting around for any hidden reinforcements."

The team carefully joined them as Shade continued to look for any cultists lurking about and they started discussing how to strike.

"We don't want to show off our strongest tactics," Humphrey said. "Everything the Builder sees now will be less effective when it comes to the big fight."

"There's going to be a big fight?" Neil asked. "I don't suppose we could avoid that."

"The Builder will know the vulnerabilities of what he's doing," Clive said. "He wants to drag us into a fight against his superior forces, so he'll make sure they're between us and whatever we need to get to."

"We need to hide our greater strengths," Humphrey said, "while making enough of a splash that it doesn't look like we're holding back."

"Something flashy," Neil said. "I think I might have an idea."

There were two cultists on the new tower, along with the construct and the converted that were their protection. One of the two was looking over a notebook while the other was looking through a crate she had taken from a dimensional bag.

"I really hope the Rejector doesn't come here," the man going through the crate said. "That guy scares the crap out of me."

"I don't see why so many of us are so worried about that guy," the woman with the notebook said. "He's just some adventurer who got lucky."

"No," he said. "I felt that soul projection that was blasted over the city in Greenstone. That terrified me. It was like my star seed was scared of his aura."

“That’s nonsense.,” she replied. “That’s like saying the Lord Builder is scared of him. He’s just angry that the Rejector defied him. Beings that powerful aren’t used to not getting their way.”

“You should be careful with your words about the Builder.”

“He doesn’t mind the truth. He’s not some god with fragile sensibilities. And don’t worry about the Rejector. The Builder will bring him to heel. In the end, the Rejector is just another bronze-ranker. Like us.”

He shook his head. “We know better than anyone the power of the Builder. What kind of person do you have to be to even try and stand up to that, let alone win?”

“He didn’t win. He endured.”

“Against the Builder, that is winning. The Rejector may be a lot of things, but like us is not one of them.”

“Why don’t you go throw in with him then, if he’s so impressive.”

“I’ve chosen to follow the Builder. Power and victory, no regrets. I know he’ll deal with the Rejector sooner, rather than later. I’m just saying I don’t want to run into the Rejector before that happens.”

She notebook felt a surge of magic and looked up just in time to see her fellow cultist vanish. In his place was a man in dark robes.

“G’day,” the man said with a grin and plucked the notebook from the startled cultist’s hands. “I might be able to resist the Builder, but I couldn’t resist an entry line like that.”

The converted and the construct turned on Jason immediately but a bubble shield appeared around him. A stone claw landed on the shield and it immediately exploded with force. The cultist, the converted and the construct were all blasted off the sides of the tower.

On a nearby rooftop, the cultist who had been switch-teleported away by Clive suddenly found himself surrounded. He didn’t have enough time to look around in surprise before Humphrey’s sword came down.

“Let’s get down there,” Humphrey said to Sophie. “That fall won’t have killed them.”

“I get the construct, you get the converted?” Sophie asked. “The construct I can at least chip away at.”

“That works for me,” Humphrey said and they both ran to the edge of the rooftop and leapt off.

Jason was reading through the confiscated notebook when the others joined him atop the new tower. He was looking between the book and the plinth in the centre, which was

covered in glowing runes. It had the look of a control panel, like the one used to operate a mirage chamber.

“What do you have there?” Clive asked.

“Some kind of instruction manual,” Jason said. “There’s a simple, direct list of what order to push stuff in for someone who really doesn’t know what they’re doing, but there’s more about the functionality if you go deeper in. With all the magic study I’ve been doing, I can actually understand it.”

“That’s good,” Clive said. “I always told you that understanding theory was important.”

“When you’re right, you’re right,” Jason said. “This tower we’re standing on seems to be an activation tower for the other one. If we ignore the instructions at the front and don’t do that, I think I’ve spotted a way we can actually sabotage the tower, instead.”

“Great,” Clive said. “I’d best give it a look over.”

“Do you not trust me?” Jason asked, mock hurt.

“Trust is relative,” Clive said. “A ritual for digging a hole, I’m happy to trust you got it right. When massive death and destruction is on the line, I think it’s worth double checking.”

“That seems fair,” Jason said.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Clive said, “if saving the day comes down to rakish insouciance, I’ll bow to your expertise. We just have different areas of specialty.”

“You’re saying that your thing is useful and practical magic that’s incredibly useful to adventurers and mine is dashing good looks and frivolous charm?”

“That wasn’t what I…”

“I’m completely okay with that,” Jason said, slapping the notebook into Clive’s hand.

“If you’re going to be reading, read fast,” Humphrey said. “We have no idea how long it will take for the Builder to send people here.”

“I know the Builder can see through his followers,” Belinda said, “but how well?”

“It can’t be perfectly,” Jason said. “Otherwise he wouldn’t be using those things.”

He nodded his head at a broken eye spider construct.

“I found that thing hiding behind the plinth, which his why it didn’t get blasted off the side. Had to squash it myself.”

He picked up the small construct.

-
- [Spyder \(destroyed\).](#)
 - [Drone \(iron rank\).](#)
-

“Spyders are cooler where I come from.”

Walking over to the edge of the building, he dropped it off the side. Clive started looking through the book and Belinda started rifling through the dimensional bag they had taken from the cultist they had teleported into their midst. She pulled out a crate holding six identical magic devices.

“Are these mana lamps?” she asked.

“They are,” Clive said, glancing up from the notebook for only a moment.

“Those are for artificially raising magical density, to use high-end rituals in areas of low-end magic,” Jason said. “Carlos used them with that soul projection ritual.”

“What would they need those for?” Belinda asked. “They’re the ones who raised the magic density here.”

“I’m not sure they intended to,” Clive said, not looking up. “I think the damage to the dimensional membrane was unintentional.”

“There’s a whole bunch of them in here,” Belinda said, pulling out two more crates. “They must be intending to do some heavy rituals.”

“They look high end,” Clive said, despite not appearing to look up. “Good mana lamps are expensive, so we should take them.”

“That’s what I like to hear,” Belinda said, putting one of the crates in her dimensional space. Humphrey did the same and Jason took the last one for his own inventory.

“It looks like you were right about the potential for sabotage, Jason,” Clive said, but he didn’t sound happy.

“You seem grouchy that I got it right,” Jason.

“It’s not that,” Clive said, still frowning at the book in his hand. “Something about this is niggling at me and I can’t figure out what.”

“Well, the notebook looks new,” Jason said. “The Builder might have even knocked it out himself. He seems like the one who knows how this place works, after all. I have to imagine he has a somewhat alien mind, which might be coming across in the way he organised the book.”

“Huh,” Clive said, turning the book over in his hands. “It does look like it was freshly made. He might have been the one to make it.”

He opened the book again and started rapidly skimming. “Oh, you sneaky... yes, the Builder wrote this. It’s a trap.”

“A trap?” Jason asked.

“The way this is written,” Clive said. “The sabotage you mentioned. It’s hidden, but only just enough that someone with a reasonable amount of magical knowledge could tease it out. It’s bait. The Builder wrote this specifically for Jason and his level of

knowledge. The sabotage seems like it would work, but I think it would just put on bit of a magic reaction that didn't really do anything."

"Why?" Humphrey asked.

"Because the 'sabotage,' would need to be done at every tower," Clive said.

"I see," Humphrey said. "The Builder's reinforcements aren't coming here. He's probably split them and sent them to the closest towers to ambush us."

"But why set a trap for Jason?" Neil asked. "Didn't he know Clive would figure it out?"

"No," Jason said. "The builder is an existence on a scale we can even comprehend. An entity like that doesn't learn about a mortal until it has to. Unless you give it a reason, the rest of you are just the Rejector's team. That why I went blabbering into that spyder thing yesterday."

"What do you mean?" Sophie asked.

"I can't stop the Builder and save the day," Jason said. "I don't have the skills or the knowledge. Clive is the hero of this story. He's our secret weapon. The Builder is focused on me because I'm the one that defied him, so my job is to keep that focus and keep our secret weapon secret."

"I'm the hero?" Clive asked. "I don't feel like the hero."

"See? You're getting it already," Jason said. "Claiming that you're not the hero is classic hero behaviour. You could stand to get that voice a bit more gravelly, though."

"You don't really think you can provoke the Builder with a few taunts, do you?" Neil asked Jason. "The Builder isn't some crime boss or pervy bureaucrat you can aggravate with your regular nonsense."

"Of course not. It doesn't matter what he thinks about me, just that it's me he's thinking about. I'm the guy that defied the will of the great Builder. We need him to keep thinking of the rest of you as the silhouettes in the background, because that's how you're going to beat him."

"Speaking of which," Humphrey said. "The sabotage is a trap, but is there anything in that book that will help up stop the Builder, or is that whole thing a lie."

"The book seems authentic," Clive said. "It pretty much has to be or it would be too easy to give the game away. It's just organised in such a fashion as to subtly lead people below a certain knowledge threshold to a specific conclusion."

"I got suckered, you mean," Jason said.

"Describe it how you like," Clive said, "but yes. I'll need more time with this book if I'm going to find something useful."

Chapter 254

Good News, Bad News

“This whole system originally belonged to the Builder,” Clive said. “There’s a good chance he has at least some sense of what is happening with it. Probably only to a limited degree, though. Otherwise he wouldn’t need to send out teams to activate these towers.”

“Meaning we should set off the phoney sabotage,” Jason said.

“Exactly meaning that,” Clive said. “If the Builder thinks we’re going for it, he’ll concentrate his forces everywhere except here because he thinks we’re going for another tower.”

“If we do that,” Humphrey said, “will it prevent your ability to figure out what’s going on?”

“No,” Clive said. “The sabotage is designed to pulse out some impressive but harmless waves of magic, after which this tower will go dark long enough for us to move on. It will restart itself in fairly short order.”

“Are you sure this sabotage thing isn’t a trap?” Jason asked. “It won’t just blow the top off the tower, will it?”

“Probably not,” Clive said.

“Probably?”

“The rest of us won’t be up here when you set it off, just in case,” Clive said. “I’m sure it’s fine, though.”

“Why am I the one doing it?” Jason asked.

“Uh... authenticity?” Clive suggested. “It’ll be a more accurate representation of someone of your skill level making the mistake.”

“Are you saying I’m so crap that you can’t even fake being this bad?” Jason asked.

“No,” Clive said. “I’m just handing you the notebook...”

He passed it back to Jason.

“...and leaving diplomatically.”

Neil let out a loud laugh, slapping Jason on the back as he followed Clive in the direction of the stairs.

“Clive’s judgement is pretty good with the magic stuff,” Belinda said, leaving with the rest of the team. Sophie flashed him an apologetic smile as she walked away with the others.

“I’m definitely sleeping with his hypothetical wife again,” Jason muttered to himself. He opened the notebook and made his way to the plinth on the centre of the tower. It was

covered in glowing runes, like the mirage chamber control panel belonging the Humphrey's family.

He took his time, taking his own notes while he prepared to follow what he had originally assessed to be a sabotage method. Now that he knew better, he started to notice the ways the notebook was directing him, along with the flaws in his original understanding.

With the fake sequence recorded in his own notebook he started touching his fingers lightly to the sigils. Their glowing lights brightened and dimmed, sometimes changing colours. Slowly but surely, the runes started going out and not coming back on.

As the final one faded out, he was unsure if he had done it right for a moment as there was no reaction. Then his magical senses picked it up something from the tower below him. It was a slow growth of power, building and gathering into a much more powerful force. Just as it seemed ready to burst, it violently unravelled, lashing at his magical senses as he felt an impressive destructive chain reaction being released.

The magic collapsed in a way that felt like a permanent end to whatever functionality it once possessed. Even knowing that it was only a wave of magic projecting a false magical impression, it was so jarringly effective that he began to have doubts.

None of it was harmful but Jason's whole body tingled from the electric sensation. He was still recovering when the team returned.

"That felt incredibly real," Neil said. "If I didn't know better, I'd have sworn the magic in this tower had just been ruined."

"We should go," Humphrey said. "We'll find somewhere to hole up nearby so Clive can examine the towers at need, but we'd best not be here if the Builder sends more people."

"That's fine," Clive said. "I'd like to take some more time with the notebook. It's far from a complete breakdown of the tower's magic but it falls right into line with what we've seen of the Builder's astral magic. That's why I'm hoping the books Knowledge gave Jason will help fill in the gaps now we have a starting point."

"We don't have time for a research project, Clive," Humphrey said. "We have hours before the Builder knows we aren't following the plan, not days. Every moment we lose is stealing away our initiative."

"Do you seriously expect me to figure out how ancient magic from outside our universe works and how to use it to stop the machinations of a great astral being, all in a matter of hours?"

"Are you saying you can't do it?" Humphrey asked.

“No,” Clive said. “I’m just making sure that you’re suitably impressed when I accomplish the absurd task you’ve set before me.”

“I think he’s let that hero thing go to his head,” Neil said.

While Clive pored over books from Jason’s inventory and the notebook they took from the cultists, Sophie and Jason scouted the area. Shade did the same, as did Stash, in the forms of various lizards and jungle birds. They were looking for any trace of cultists or the Builder’s spyders.

Clive eventually pulled Jason off scout duty, roping him and Belinda into a renewed investigation into the towers, as they were the ones with enough knowledge to be useful. Clive was inside the tower with the world engineer while Belinda was on top, keeping a close eye on the portal gate. Through Jason’s voice chat, Clive directed him to use the control plinth on the new offshore tower.

“Alright, Lindy,” Clive said after several hours work. “Watch out, because this should get a reaction. You might want to back off a few steps. Jason, you can start the next sequence.”

Jason waited for Belinda to back off, then started working the controls in the sequence Clive fed him. It was lengthy but eventually they got a result. For the first time since falling dormant after their arrival, the portal arch filled with dark energy. It lit up with stars like Jason’s cloak, which grew brighter and brighter before erupting out of the portal with a sizzling sound. Belinda was already well clear, but took a few extra steps back anyway. After the brief, pyrotechnic burst, the portal settled back down and was once again filled with only the darkness.

“Did we open the portal?” Belinda asked, looking at it. “Can we go home, maybe get some reinforcements?”

“It looks like a normal open portal?” Clive asked, still inside the tower.

“Just like Jason’s portal ability,” Belinda said. “Although his doesn’t shoot of a bunch of sparks first.”

“Under no circumstances should you attempt to go through,” Clive said. “We didn’t open a portal. This is a test to see if I could get the arch to interact with the dimensional membrane. If you tried going through it, you wouldn’t teleport anywhere. It would look like you disappeared because what little of your body that made it through would be in pieces too small to see with the naked eye.”

After a number of similar tests, they retreated to a nearby hiding spot. The team remained vigilant of their surroundings as Clive was absorbed in the huge number of notes

he had written, muttering to himself. His notes were scattered amongst Jason's books, sitting open and the cultist's notebook, which he had taken apart, page by page. The whole mess was a riot of magical diagrams and multi-lingual texts that only Clive himself was able to discern any kind of order in.

Clive stood up and paced around, then abruptly stopped, turning to stare at the mess he had made with a gaze that could have bored into the brick floor. His hands were behind his head, fingers interlocked as his brain turned over.

"It doesn't make sense," he said to himself. "It doesn't fit. Why doesn't it fit?"

"What doesn't fit?" Belinda asked. Her time as Clive's assistant had given her a decent sense of how to be a good sounding board for him.

"The portal gates," Clive said. "the gates are integrated into the whole system, but instead of serving the dormant world engineers, its like they're feeding on them."

"How so?" she asked.

"Alright," he said. "So, the portal arches are, at their core, a very escalated version of Jason's essence power. Using an essence power as a model for other kinds of magic is a common practise, given that essence abilities represent the most stable forms of magic. To operate these portals, they were tapping into the world engineers. Even dormant they were an incredible source of magic. Drawing that power from the golems was only ever going to make it harder to awaken them. There may even be some damage to them after using them like this for centuries. Why would the Builder create such a terrible, ill-fitted system? It's throwing off my whole understanding of how it all works together."

"That's easy," Belinda said. "The Builder didn't do it. The Order of the Reaper did. What do they care about the integrity of the Builder's constructs?"

Clive slapped his hands over his face, letting out a groan.

"I'm an idiot," he berated himself. "How could I overlook something that obvious?"

"You understand it now?" Jason asked.

"More than that," Clive said, flashing the kind of wild, predatory grin the team would expect from Jason. "I might have just had an idea that solves all our problems."

"All of them?" Jason asked.

"All of them," Clive confirmed. "Oh, gods, as soon as you look at it from the perspective of two groups working at odds, everything falls into place."

"Care to share your revelation?" Humphrey asked.

"On the way," Clive said. "We have to run more tests."

"Zato?"

“Yes, Lord Builder?”

“I’ve ordered the enhanced teams back here to the central tower. The rejector isn’t going to the other towers.”

“You said the sabotage was triggered on one of the towers,” Zato said.

“A stalling tactic,” the Builder said. “It is long past time they should have arrived at another tower, and now the tower they supposedly sabotaged is being used again. They are experimenting, but not getting far. All they’ve managed is to open a false portal that would have killed them if they stepped through.”

“We can only hope,” Zato said. “Should we send people after them?”

“No,” the Builder said. “They are going to come here.”

“Against the bulk of our forces and our defensive position? That would be foolish.”

“Yes” the Builder said. “The one thing Asano can be relied upon to do is the last thing he should. He thrives on the unanticipated surprise of the foolish move.”

“What does he hope to accomplish?”

“Presumably to destroy the central tower,” the Builder said. “It seems he has seen through the false sabotage, but there is no way he could comprehend the mechanisms for awakening the world engineers, even if he found them and determined that was the goal. I’ve seen inside his mind and know his level of understanding. It would not be enough to build a knowledge base that could decipher the functions of this place. He will likely conclude that if he can destroy the tower, he can bring it all to an end.”

“Can he?” Zato asked.

“No. The magic flowing through the tower would prevent even me from affecting it further without all but eradicating this vessel on the spot.”

“So we just wait for the rejector to come to us?”

“Yes. It is time to put an end to the mortal who thinks he can pit himself against a being beyond his meagre comprehension. He shall learn the price of challenging true power.”

Clive was sat, cross-legged on Onslow, who was floating back towards the towers. Belinda had used her ability to conjure simple objects to make him a small knee bench, which he was using to scribble down new sequences to test out on the towers. As he did, he was explaining what he had learned from the team.

“There’s a lot of good news,” Clive said. “Some bad too, but we’ll get to that. The first piece of good news is that these towers are all integrated into a single, linked system. There’s enough here in these notes provided by the builder that I can more or less

determine what they do and – this is the important thing – how. I cannot overstate the value of those books of Jason's. They have dimensional transgression theory that makes our most sophisticated astral magic look like cave drawings.”

“And what do these towers do?” Humphrey said. “We were already assuming that the point is to wake up the giant golems.”

“That's only part of it,” Clive said. Despite holding a conversation, he never looked up from the notes he continued to rapidly scrawl. “Do you all remember that this astral space is artificially attached to our world?”

“Sure,” Neil said.

“Well, I don't think it was just the connection to our world,” Clive said. “I think this entire astral space is artificial. It's a giant boarding vessel. Instead of delivering people onto ships, it delivers the Builder's most powerful weapons onto worlds. He loads it up with these world engineer things, clamps it onto the side of a world and then sends them in. But something happened, here, to change all that.”

“I think a lot of things happened here,” Neil said.

“Somehow,” Clive continued, “this place was taken out of the Builder's hands and placed in the Order of the Reaper's. They repurposed it various ways, but only one is relevant to us now. They repurposed the interdimensional mechanisms designed to launch the world engineers into a transport system, using a portal power as a template.”

“How does that affect us now?” Humphrey said.

“For one thing,” Clive said, “it's the reason the Builder had to send out teams instead of just directing the whole thing to operate. His teams are bypassing the Order of the Reaper's alteration to restore the original functionality of the towers and the Builder's ability to control the towers remotely.”

Clive was still scribbling away madly, even as his explanation became more excited.

“So that bought us the time to try something,” Sophie said. “But now what do we try?”

“We reconfigure the whole system the Builder is activating,” Clive said. “Instead of moving it away from the order's modifications, we amplify it with the power coursing out from the central tower. I mentioned before that the Order's changes were potentially damaging to the golems? This process will be worse for them than ever, as in piles of scrap. It will also burn out the ability of the original system to send them to our world.”

“Which shuts down the Builder's plans entirely,” Humphrey said. “I like it.”

“You'll like this more,” Clive said. “All that power won't be going into the world engineers, but coming out of them. It will go back to what the Order of the Reaper had it doing, which was to power what the portal was for in the first place.”

“You mean...?” Neil asked, almost superstitious in voicing hope.

“I mean opening a portal home,” Clive said. “That much power should blast right through the interference caused by the damage to the dimensional membrane.”

“So, we shut down the golems, foiling the Builder and open a path home, all at the same time?” Belinda asked.

“I told you,” Clive said. “A solution to all our problems. There is a catch, however.”

“Which is?” Humphrey asked.

“The actual reconfiguring is actually quite simple,” Clive said. “As Jason noted, something operating on this scale has many potential failure points. It took weeks to configure the portal correctly and get us into the astral space. I brought enough materials to do something similar, if required, to get us back out. The damaged dimensional membrane rendered that moot, but I can use those materials to construct a fairly simple device to recalibrate the whole system in the way we need. I just need to use the towers here to calibrate the device itself.”

“That sounds good so far,” Humphrey said.

“The trick,” Clive said, “is that we have to take the device to the central tower to make it work. I’m pretty sure we’ll need to get it inside the tower, then run it up from the bottom to the top. We need to carry the device up through the interior of the building.”

“You mean actually, physically carry it? Jason asked.”

“Yes.”

“That’s it?” Jason asked. “Bottom to top? No rituals, no messing with the tower.”

“That’s the beauty of it,” Clive said. “The Builder has already done all the work. All we have to do is flip the process on its head, so instead of moving away from the order’s alterations, the system pushes back into them.”

“Great,” Sophie said. “All we have to deal with is a silver-ranker, the Builder itself and an army of constructs, cultists and weird messed-up people that won’t die.”

“I did say there would be bad news,” Clive said.

“How confident are you in this?” Humphrey asked Clive.

“I’m working from unreliable notebooks, magical theory I barely understand and crazy world-invading devices operating on a larger scale than any magic I’ve ever seen,” Clive said. “But it’s this or we sit back and watch the Builder do whatever he likes.”

“That’s pretty good, under the circumstances,” Jason said.

Humphrey nodded.

“You’ve done better than anyone could have asked,” he told Clive.

“Didn’t stop you from asking, though, did it?”

“That leaves the rest of us to come up with a plan on how to overcome impossible odds, where the enemy has the strength, the numbers, the defensive position and probably knows we’re coming, if not why.”

“I always figured that we would need to take the fight to them, sooner or later,” Jason said. “I’ve been thinking about how to do that for a while and I do have one idea.”

“What is it?” Humphrey asked.

“Well,” Jason said, “it’s audacious, crazy and something I learned from a video game, so very much me.”

“What’s a video game?” Neil asked.

“Never mind that,” Humphrey said. “What’s the idea?”

“We run a train on the Builder,” Jason said.

Chapter 255

Here We Are

“This a bad plan,” Sophie yelled at Jason as they ran side by side. He was pouring on every bit of speed he could muster, while she was running backwards and still had to ameliorate her speed to match his.

“This is a fantastic plan,” he yelled back.

The were moving down a wide boulevard, chosen for being one of the more open and least overgrown. It was still more jungle floor than flagstone road, but they had become expert at navigating the terrain of the astral space and it didn't slow them down.

Behind them, the sound of the stampeding monsters pursuing them was like an endless rumble of thunder as heavy feet and other appendages pounded into the ground.

“Back in my world, people do a thing like this for fun.”

“For fun? I everyone in your world as crazy as you?”

“Of course not. I'm special.”

Periodically, the monsters would make ranged attacks against the fleeing adventurers, from magic blasts to needle spines the size of a forearm. Sophie was keeping an eye out for such attacks and would blast them all away.

Ability: [Wind Wave] (Wind)

- Special Ability (movement).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 6 seconds.

- Current rank: Bronze 2 (91%).

- Effect (iron): Effect (Iron): Produce a powerful blast of air that can push away enemies and physical projectiles. Can be used to launch into the air or move rapidly while already airborne.

- Effect (bronze): Can affect magical projectiles and some magical area effects.

“Was I even necessary for this?” Jason asked.

“Of course you were,” Sophie said. “You're the only one who could annoy this many things enough to chase us this hard.”

Humphrey, Clive and Neil were hidden atop one of the buildings closest to the crater from which the central tower had arisen. The tower itself was in the deepest part of the

crater, yet still towered over every other edifice in the city. Laying flat on the rooftop, they watched the enemy encampment set up around the tower through magnification crystals.

The camp occupied the entirety of the crater. Walls had been raised up all around the crater's lip, some five metres high. The only glimpses they got of the inside was when the heavy stone gates were swung open to admit returning teams of cultists, constructs and converted.

The walls were the result of earth-shaping powers. These were crude affairs created by the cultists rather than the formidable walls the Builder had created around their previous fort. These fared poorly by comparison but were still five metres high and two thick. Anything less would have trouble holding up against silver-rank monsters.

The cultists had completely decamped from their original fort, to the dismay of the team. The fort would have been much harder to attack, but the objective was the tower, not the cultists around it. If the cultists had still occupied their original encampment, the team wouldn't need to deal with them.

Through their magnification crystals they had managed to get some sense of the interior, having set themselves up for the best view through one of the gates. The slope of the crater had been earth-shaped into a series of flat tiers, like exceptionally wide stairs. The cultists were set up on those tiers, leading down to the tower itself.

The tower was thrumming with magical energy, to the point of overpowering any magical senses. Even as far back as the building they were hiding on, their magical senses were washed out with the raw potency of it. It didn't present any danger, but even at range it was headache-inducing. They suspected that up close it would be hard to tolerate at all.

Periodically, groups of cultists would return to the camp, having made their way back to the city from the external towers. None of them were leaving, suggesting that the Builder was consolidating his forces.

"There she is," Humphrey said as another such group appeared. They were the usual mix of a couple of cultists, a few constructs and a contingent of the automaton-like converted. One of the gates in the wall opened to admit them, but only the observing team noticed one of the converted peel off to hug the exterior of the wall, beside the heavy stone gate.

"I still say this is a bad idea," Clive said. "She's so exposed. What if the Builder or the silver-ranker senses her through her shape-changing powers."

“We’re all taking risks,” Humphrey said. “She knows the dangers and she chose to go anyway. If we can lead the monsters into the camp instead of just around it, we have a much better chance of infiltrating the tower in the chaos.”

Hugging the wall of the cultist camp, the shape-changed Belinda took a steeling breath.

“How are those monsters coming along?” she asked through voice chat.

“Getting close,” Sophie’s voice came back. “You should start hearing them any moment.”

“I’ll get started then,” Belinda said, moving to the front of the gate and pulling a stick of chalk from her storage space.

“You can do this,” she assured herself as she started drawing out a ritual on the large stone door. “You definitely won’t be caught and flayed alive by an evil god-thing.”

She continued drawing, willing the gate not to open.

In the camp, Zato shook his head. The tower had increasingly been building up magical energy, to the point that was now bombarding the senses of everyone around it. The constructs and the blank-faced converted were not visibly affected, but his cultists were growing increasingly aggravated.

His cultists were being driven to the edge by the sensory bombardment. They were snapping at each other and he had already needed to intervene after a fight broke out. He couldn’t care less what they did to one another but it demonstrated an unacceptable lack of discipline. He refused to let them make him look bad in front of the Builder.

He tilted his head, listening as he heard what sounded like thunder. He looked up at the sky, the vibrant blue as empty of clouds as ever. The sound continued, even getting louder. The rest of the camp didn’t share his silver-rank perception and hadn’t heard anything yet, so no one around him was reacting.

He got up from his chair and quickly made his way up the tiers of the crater to the walls. There were stairs periodically placed around the insides and he took them two at a time to quickly reach the top.

He looked out at the surrounding area. The crater had been located at the centre of a huge square, surrounded by buildings damaged by the explosive detonation of the Order of the Reaper’s tower. Between the walls of the camp and those buildings was completely open space. He crested the wall just in time to see monsters start pouring out from between a pair of the buildings and into that open space. It was one of the gathered herds

of intermingled monsters that had been forming in the city, now running toward the camp in a frenzy

“What the...?”

He spotted two figures running ahead of the frenzied tide of monsters. His eyes easily made out the shadowy cloak drifting behind one of them as they ran.

“Rejector,” he muttered. He was about to shout the alarm when someone teleported right in front him. It was a large man with a large sword, stylised in the shape of a dragon wing. He took advantage of Zato’s startled pause, breathing fire over the cultists.

Humphrey spotted the man move onto the walls just as Jason and Sophie led the monsters into the square. Seconds mattered, so he made a snap decision, conjuring his sword and teleporting right in front of the man. Humphrey’s senses told him that this was the other silver-ranker but Humphrey didn’t hesitate. Immediately breathing fire, he unleashed his Unstoppable Force attack and sent the man tumbling backwards and over the edge of the wall.

Zato crashing to the ground was alarming, but no so much as it would be should he have actually called out the alarm. It gave the monsters precious time to chase Jason and Sophie closer to the gate, which meant less time for the camp to ready itself.

With Jason and Sophie on the approach and Humphrey already in the fray, Clive knew it was time to act. He called out Onslow, picked up the puppy Stash and climbed onto the familiar’s shell, Neil climbing up with him. The rune tortoise floated off the rooftop, drifting to the ground on a cushion of air. At ground level, Onslow’s speed picked up as he hovered over the ground, moving towards the camp with increasing haste.

The people in the camp barely had time to register the thundering sound of the monster herd before Belinda completed her ritual and the gate exploded inward. With the horde of monsters descending on her she used one of her abilities to join Clive and Neil atop Onslow’s shell.

Ability: [Bait and Switch] (Trap)

- Special Ability (dimension, illusion).
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 1 minute.

- Current rank: Bronze 1 (87%).

- **Effect (iron):** Effect (Iron): Teleport self or nearby ally to a nearby location. The subject is rendered invisible for a brief period, leaving behind a lifelike illusion. The illusion has no substance or aura.
 - **Effect (bronze):** Illusion explodes when approached by an enemy, inflicting disruptive-force damage.
-

“This is quite roomy,” she said as she appeared on Onslow, with Stash immediately hopping into her lap. Her own familiars she didn’t call out yet.

“He’s a good boy,” Clive said, giving Onslow an affectionate pat.

Even as fragment of the shattered gate were still falling to the ground, Jason and Sophie dashed through the gap with monsters on their heels. There was a blast as one of the monsters lunged at the illusion Belinda left behind. The rest of the monsters ignored it, continuing to chase Jason and Sophie unabated. Once through the gate, Jason and Sophie split left and right, but the camp contained more than enough to keep the monsters occupied.

The changes in magic to the astral space had given the monsters an affinity for one another, but a wild aggression toward anything not monstrous. It was akin to the berserk fury that overtook monsters at the end of their life cycle, but the monsters in the astral space were being affected far too early. As they poured into the camp, they found themselves with a cornucopia of things on which to unleash their unquenchable rage.

Zato got to his feet, ignoring the fact that he was on fire. Thadwick and Dougall had their essence powers consumed to prepare them to contain a sliver of the Builder’s power. Zato’s essence powers had likewise consumed as fuel for the Builders power, but in a fundamentally different way. Instead of a vessel, Zato had been transformed into a weapon.

Humphrey’s flames burned at Zato’s clothes and skin but he paid it no attention. Where his skin burned away, it uncovered a second skin of gleaming metal beneath. His hair burned away and the front of his eyes was seared away, revealing the crystal orbs that were his true eyes. He panned them around the camp, taking stock of the situation.

As he had been tossed to the ground, the gates had been blasted open and monsters had come spilling into the camp. They poured down the tiered steps of the encampment, attacking anything that moved and destroying anything that didn’t. Tents were torn up and the converted and constructs were triggered into action as they were attacked.

One of the monsters came Zato's way, leaping through the air at him. He grabbed it by the face, plucking it out of the air. He clapped down with his other hand, crushing its head and he dropped the corpse to the ground.

He looked down at his chest, the skin all burned away. There was a good-sized dent left behind from the blow that had sent him tumbling from the wall. He was surprised that the big bronze-ranker with big sword had been able to damage him that much. The metal rippled like water and the dent was smoothed out. He looked up at the spot on the wall he had been knocked down from, but couldn't spot the man who had sent him tumbling.

Humphrey hadn't been foolish enough to wait around for a silver-ranker to recover and had called up his dragon wings. He flew over the monsters still streaming into the camp and towards Onslow to rejoin the group. He was joined by Sophie who had run up the inside of the wall and leapt off, regrouping with the others.

"I'll get to one of the other gates and let you in," Jason told them through voice chat. "Make your way to the first gate to the left of where the monsters are coming in."

He started making his way through the camp, which had become a wild melee. Monsters clashed with the constructs and the converted. Some cultists were trying to organise their unthinking minions into some kind of order, while others scrambled in a futile attempt to find safety as monsters continued pouring in.

Jason noted that the converted and the constructs had both picked up new abilities. Some looked like those they had encountered before, but they were now able to separate into wholly separate segments, able to operate independently. The smaller constructs were better equipped to chase down smaller and faster enemies.

The constructs were dividing into two types. The majority were the original constructs, modified to separate. Once divided, their components parts were rather bizarre in form, having not been originally intended for the purpose. The newer constructs were purpose built, and while they were less physically sturdy than the originals, their divided parts were faster and more dangerous.

The converted had acquired grotesque new powers of their own. Some were fighting with huge, retractable blades coming out of their arms. Others were segmenting their limbs, which remained connected with wires and gave them a strange, flailing attacks.

Shade's bodies moved through the mess. It gave Jason pathways to shadow jump in the direction of the gate, although he did not go unmolested. He had to stop and deal with a persistent pair of monsters and then one of the converted. He quickly unleashed a storm of afflictions that rotted the flesh off its bones, but it kept fighting, even when it was little

more than a skeleton draped in scraps of black flesh. Jason's used his execute ability to finished the job.

Before he reached the gate he also took the time to dispose of a cultist that looked to be doing a decent job of directing the constructs. Jason wanted as much discord as possible to cover the team's activities, so he dealt with the industrious cultist before she could start getting things in order.

Finally reaching the gate, he found it unattended in the chaos. There was no mechanism, just a heavy bar, but his bronze-rank strength was enough to remove it and pull open one of the heavy stone doors.

"About time," Neil said as Jason found the team waiting outside. "You've obviously been lazing about in there."

"We need to get in that tower as quickly and quietly as we can," Humphrey said. "Put Onslow away, Clive. He stands out a bit much."

Onslow let out a sad squeaking noise that was oddly-high pitched for a creature so large, but dissolved into blue sparks that flew towards Clive, sinking through his clothes to take the form of a tattoo.

The team started making their way through the mess of combat, fighting their way through as a unit. They were slowly carving a path down the steps of the sloped encampment toward the tower when the Builder descended from the sky, although he did not land close to the team.

The Builder either didn't have a slow falling power or just didn't care, crashing into the ground like a boulder. The monster that had been between him and the ground was killed instantly. It looked as if the Builder had simply leapt from the tower's upper reaches.

As it stepped off the carcass, the Builder blasted out an aura. It was at the very peak of silver rank, powerful and terrible, like the weight of a building pressing down. Jason's aura had an echo of transcendence that only someone skilled and sensitive would recognise. The Builder's aura was thick with it and the effect was oppressive to the point of feeling like being at the bottom of the ocean.

The team, like all the monsters around them, had their auras suppressed, leaving them feeling vulnerable and exposed. Only Jason's held firm and the Builder turned its head on a swivel and the pair locked eyes.

For a single moment, the camp went still as everything was suppressed by the Builder's aura, the strongest he could produce with his current vessel. The sound of battle faded as the Builder's minions fell still and the monsters were cowed. In the strange, eerie

silence, Jason and the Builder looked at one another. Jason started walking forward, past the stilled minions and fearful monsters, holding the Builder's gaze.

The Builder was not a rancher, farmer, or anyone else who worked with cattle or other livestock. If he had been, he might have had some idea what happens when a very large number of very scared animals are held together in an enclosed space. The fear-induced stillness of the monsters only lasted for a strangely silent moment before the spell was broken.

Panic took over and chaos exploded over the camp like a bomb as the monsters went wild and screams of terror rent the air. The monsters tried to stampede but they had packed themselves into the camp and the walls now boxed them in. That didn't stop their mad scramble to escape, the crush turning the camp into a furious meat grinder. Even the previous melee seemed like a quiet church service in comparison.

The converted and constructs were once again triggered into combat mode but the monsters didn't even fight back in their desperation to escape the terrifying presence of the Builder. They were more dangerous in their panicked crush than they had been in berserker rage.

The team's aura training had included having their auras suppressed, so they weren't debilitated, although it left them extremely uneasy as they once more started fighting their way towards the tower. Sophie made to go after Jason but was yanked back by Humphrey.

"He has his job," Humphrey yelled at her over the din, "and we have ours."

The eye of the storm was the empty space around the Builder, the place the monsters were pushing into one another to avoid. Jason stepped into that space, the two looking at each other in a calm bizarre amidst the fury going on around it.

"Here we are." Jason said. "I'm just telling you now, so you don't say you weren't warned: This time I brought pants."

Chapter 256

Outmatched

The walls of the encampment had become a prison to the monsters driven to panic by the Builder's aura. They were stampeding with nowhere to stampede to, a wild crush that was catching up the cultists and the construct and converted that served them. It was somewhere between a juice press and a meat grinder.

The air was filled with the sounds of combat and terror. The monsters let out a menagerie of shrieks, cries and roars. Cultists were yelling, trying to direct the constructs and converted. The automaton servitors made no sounds themselves, but the sounds of their destruction at the claws of frenzied monsters added to the storm of noise.

There was one space of eerie calm. No matter how scared or driven to madness they were, no monster would draw close the Builder. In the eye of the storm, Two figures stood still, staring each other down.

The Builder was wearing Thadwick's face. Instead of the snide, entitled expression, there was now an incredible presence animating what were actually quite handsome features. Instead of arrogance, there was a confidence that transcended the mortal shape it was inhabiting. That shape was still intact, the Builder's power not yet taxing it to the point of breaking down.

The Builder cut a heroic figure, facing off against Jason's sinister, shadowy appearance. Over flowing, black combat robes was his cloak of night, a veil of darkness and starlight with the promise of mystery and power.

"You have an inflated sense of your own importance," the Builder said.

It spoke softly, yet its words carried perfectly to Jason, even over the cacophonous din around them.

"Yep," Jason agreed. He also spoke softly, having no doubt the Builder could hear him as well.

"You think all this will let you stop me?" the Builder asked.

"It would be a lot of trouble to go to if I didn't," Jason said.

"I'm not going to kill you," the Builder said. "You have caused me trouble enough that I will make an example of you. The next person looking to cross me will think twice when they learned what happened to you."

"Really?" Jason asked, his voice this with derision. "You try and use my soul as a hand puppet and you want revenge because I didn't let you? For a great astral being, that's very human."

“Do not try and bring me down to your level.”

“You’re already here, mate, but that’s not on me. I’m just some random, low-ranked bloke trying to make his way in the world. Or worlds, plural, I guess. You saw some idiot sling a soul your way, tried to snatch it up and it didn’t work out. You could have left it at that but you just couldn’t let it go. You brought yourself down to my level and here we are. Well, slightly above my level. Frankly, you could do with a nerf, just for fairness. For all your vast, cosmic power, at the end of the day you’re a sentient being, just like the rest of us. I guess pride is a hard vice to shake, operating at your level.”

“Do you think I don’t see through what you are doing?” the Builder said.

“Engaging in classic hero-villain banter. I won’t lie; this is something of a dream come true for me.”

“Whatever your companions are doing, they will not succeed. Zato will stop them.”

“That’s funny,” Jason said. “I believe in my friends too. We have that in common.”

“I adjusted Zato’s body modifications personally,” the Builder said. “Even after the consumption of his essences, he is stronger than he ever was as a mere essence user.”

“The team knocked off a silver-rank essence user already. They can deal with your little hand puppet.”

“You killed Hendren through the escalating power of your flesh-rotting abilities. I reforged Zato in such a way that those powers cannot harm him. Even if you were with them to help, your powers would be futile. But you are not with them. I will capture you and he will capture them. I will claim their souls and they will be the ones to kill you, slowly and painfully. I will record it all, that every being that serves me will see for themselves the fate of the great Rejector. You will be a useful recruiting tool.”

“Yet, ironically, the one acting like a huge tool is you.”

“Name calling is the best response you can muster?”

“You’ve been inside my brain,” Jason said. “So you know that it pretty much is, yeah. I’m being facetious, though. In all honesty, that was some solid villain monologuing. You should look into getting a weather machine.”

“You still believe you can win,” the Builder said. “This is not a matter of win or lose. It is a matter of how long it takes for my intentions to be realised.”

“How about a compromise?” Jason asked. “We could give you something else instead of huge strips peeled off the side of reality. How do you feel about delicious sandwiches?”

“You are tiresome,” the Builder said. “It is time to end this.”

Jason felt magic surge in the ground beneath him. He vanished into his shadow as two slabs made of the ground beneath him rose up to snap together like a bear trap. All they caught was the body of Shade left behind, which was unharmed.

“Just a tip,” Jason called out from within the monster scrum. “You shouldn’t warn that people you’re about to make a sneak attack.”

The Builder gestured in the direction Jason’s voice had come and a wave of stone spike rose up from the Builder’s feet and crashed into the monsters. Jason, in the meantime, emerged from the other direction and lunged at the Builder. A wall rose up in his face, blocking him off, before exploded over him, thousands of razor fragments storming over him over him like a hurricane in a gravel quarry. His cloak danced to life, a forest of dark tendrils zipping out to intercept the projectiles. Most of the fragments blew past him, while the rest fell harmlessly at his feet.

Jason dashed into melee. As it turned out, great astral beings had little use for martial arts skills, and the one’s the Builder inherited from Thadwick were significantly sub-par. Jason’s dagger flashed rapidly, scoring quick marks on the Builder’s flesh.

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- Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] and Mark of [Price of Absolution] on [Builder’s Vessel].
 - Transcendent power within [Builder’s Vessel] has negated these effects.
 - [Sin] does not take effect.
 - [Price of Absolution] does not take effect.
-

“That’s not good.”

The Builder grabbed Jason by the face. Gordon appeared with a surge of Jason’s aura and beams of blue and orange energy blasted from his four orbs. They focused on the Builder’s arm and the Builder let go of Jason, who vanished into his shadow again. A dozen spikes burst out of the ground and floated between the Builder and Gordon. The air around them started shimmering and the spikes launched out, tearing large rents in Gordon’s incorporeal body. Gordon dissolved into a nebula and shot away into the crowd of monsters, where Jason has escaped to. Jason reabsorbed his familiar back into his aura.

Each of the combatants were making unpleasant discoveries as they fought. Jason was the worst off, with the realisation that he had no means to effectively harm the Builder. Even his strongest trump card, Colin, would be of no use when afflictions couldn’t take hold. The best he could hope for was that his sword would be effective, which was a slim chance against the most powerful enemy he had ever faced.

The Builder was discovering the limits of its vessel. Vessels were meant to be generals, not soldiers, and channelling even moderate amounts of power through them accelerated their degradation. This vessel in particular was weaker than it would normally tolerate but this was a pursuit it would undertake personally.

Jason's words had found their mark when he said the Builder's pride as a great astral being had been pricked. Even with the considerable luck and circumstance that made it possible for Jason to win the battle for his soul, the fact remained that he had won. Given the disparity in their power, it was an intolerable record for a being of near infinite power.

If Asano died by any means but the Builder's own design, he would achieve a kind of immortality as the Builder remembered the mortal who bested it for all eternity. This was not an outcome the great astral being was willing to tolerate.

Unable to effectively fight, Jason was forced to flee. Unable to let him go, the Builder was forced to give chase.

When the camp had been plunged into chaos, the rest of Jason's team started fighting their way through the madness. Like an icebreaker ship they were a solid wedge, smashing a path through hostile and inhospitable territory.

After the Builder's attempt to pacify the situation with its aura backfired so wildly, it had withdrawn it. This allowed the team's own auras to recover but the damage was done as far as the monsters were concerned. The crush would not abate until they died or escaped the walls.

The team had to fight past monsters, constructs and converted as they slowly made their way down the tiered levels of the camp. They didn't bother finishing off anything tough enough to survive a handful of attacks. Stopping to secure kills would only slow them down and nothing was following them in the crazed, shoulder to shoulder press.

As they closed in on the tower they found the monsters were pushing away from it, clearing something of a space as they jammed into one another to get away. The magic throbbing from the tower carried a similar feel to the Builder and the monsters were terrified of it.

The team spotted a large archway leading inside and made straight for it. As they did, a silvery metallic figure with crystal eyes stepped out. It radiated a silver rank aura, but not that of an essence user. It was strange and alien, like that of the Builder itself.

"I am Zato," it called out loudly over the noise. "If you submit now, things will go better for you. Either way, your souls will belong to the Builder, but if you join us willingly, you will keep your own mind. It is better to be a willing servant than a mindless slave."

“As much as we’d love the chance to turn into a shiny doorknob like you,” Sophie said, “we’re kind of busy, so we’re going to start the fight, now.”

True to her word, Sophie lunged forward, Humphrey close behind. Belinda moved to protect the team from any stray monsters, Stash doing the same as he took the form of a marsh hydra. Clive called out Onslow to join them and Neil chanced pouring a salt circle to call up his golem. With the support of the familiars and the summon, Belinda formed a wall to cover the team’s backs while they faced the danger in front of them.

Months of constant fighting in the astral space was a whetstone that had honed the team to a razor sharp edge. They each knew what the others would do before they went to do it, turning them from a team with strong synergies into a singular whole, moving and acting as one.

They had experienced what amounted to three monster surges back to back, struggling to keep up as the monsters grew more and more powerful. It had brought their skill, power and experience to the point where they were literally transformed from the people they had been at the beginning.

The result of all that growth in their power, skill and teamwork was that they barely managed to avoid immediate death as Zato counter-attacked.

Zato was not an unthinking construct, despite surrendering his organic body for shining metal. Nor was he a monster driven by instinct. He immediately broke through Sophie and Humphrey, bowling them out of the way in spite of Humphrey’s strength. Zato knew that the backline members were the key to breaking apart the team and charged at Neil like a silver rocket.

The attack landed on Neil, who exploded in a wave of force, blasting Zato back. Belinda’s perfectly-timed Bait and Switch ability had teleported Neil to safety, leaving an illusionary trap for Zato.

Ability: [Bait and Switch] (Trap)

- Special ability (dimension, illusion).
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 1 minute.

- Current rank: Bronze 3 (09%).

- Effect (iron): Teleport self or nearby ally to a nearby location. The subject is rendered invisible for a brief period, leaving behind a lifelike illusion. The illusion has no substance or aura.

- **Effect (bronze):** The illusion explodes when approached by an enemy, inflicting disruptive-force damage.
-

With Zato's first attack blunted, Sophie and Humphrey moved back in, while the others repositioned defensively. Zato was barely staggered by the explosion, suffering little worse than the arresting of his momentum. His metal body was resistant to the disruptive-force released by the ability, which was more effective against magical defences. It was resonating-force damage that would be most effective against Zato's metal form. Humphrey knew this and swung in with Shield Breaker, his resonating-force special attack.

Zato's body was incredibly resilient, even against Humphrey's special attacks. They were just threatening enough that Zato was forced to engage, rather than ignore him. Even with his dragon armour, Humphrey would not hold up to Zato's sustained attacks. While he lacked Sophie's evasiveness, he had his own means of adding to his defensiveness.

Humphrey's attacks were hard to avoid and Humphrey himself was hard to hit, as there seemed to be four of him attacking at once with his huge dragon wing sword. One of the illusionary doubles was from Humphrey's own ability, Attack of the Mirage Dragon, which created a double each time he attacked. It didn't inflict any damage, but Humphrey could switch-teleport with it, making his true attack unpredictable.

The other two illusionary forms came from Belinda's familiar, Gemini. The living illusion could duplicate Humphrey's appearance, including his own illusionary double.

Zato proved to have far more capability than merely the strength and fortitude that came with his metal body. His silvery body flowed like quicksilver, reshaping itself to produce a versatile slate of combat abilities.

In close, he could produce spear-like protrusions from anywhere on his body, making unexpected attacks from unexpected angles. He also grew extra limbs, which he transformed into blades. At range, he could project metal spikes, which he threw past Sophie and Humphrey to target Neil, whose healing and shields were making up the difference between Zato and Humphrey's combat abilities.

Sophie focused on intercepting the projectiles as Humphrey held up Zato's forward movement. Zato then revealed that the spikes were far from his only trick. By plunging his hands into the ground he could make spikes spring up at range, then explode them into splinters. That attack savaged Neil appearing within his mana shield and exploding to send shrapnel digging into his body. Sophie and Humphrey redoubled their efforts to hold Zato's attention while Neil tossed back a healing potion and followed up with a life bolt spell on himself.

The one key advantage the team had was a curse levied on Zato by Belinda. It took multiple attempts to latch on past silver-rank resistances, the cooldown not triggering until it finally landed.

Ability: [Power Lock] (Magic)

- Special ability (curse).
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 1 minute.

- Current rank: Bronze 2 (47%).

- Effect (iron): When the target uses an ability, a random other ability also goes on cooldown, as if it had been used. If the target has no other abilities, the cooldown on the ability used is doubled or, if the ability has no cooldown, it becomes unavailable for a brief period.

- Effect (bronze): The ability placed on cooldown consumes mana as if it had been used. If the ability had no mana cost, the target suffers disruptive-force damage commensurate with the strength of the ability.

Belinda's curse meant that Zato had to constantly change up his powers while waiting for others to become available. Many of his best abilities were locked out before he even had a chance to use them and his combination attacks were neutered as key steps were denied to him. It was a frustrating and effective impediment that was crucial to the team's survival, as even impaired he was on the constant verge of overwhelming the team.

While he was stuck using them almost at random, Zato had no shortage of powers to go through. Most were either some variation on shape-changing or firing metal projectiles. As the fight dragged on he threw balls that exploded into shrapnel, turned his arms into razor whips and his fingers into knives.

Sophie desperately intercepted the storms of projectiles thrown in the direction of their healer. As quick as the mercury Zato's body resembled, her flickering figure was a steadfast barrier for Neil.

Many of the ranged attacks Zato threw out were wide-area shrapnel attacks, from which Sophie suffered a beating. Weak, multitudinous attacks were what more traditional defenders were best at, while Sophie specialised in dodging or negating powerful, singular attacks. The peppering of attacks was precisely what she was worst at handling, which Zato quickly picked up on.

He started throwing more and more shrapnel attacks at Neil, knowing that she would surrender her vaunted evasiveness to body-block the shrapnel. She was able to blast

many of the attacks away with her Wind Wave, but Zato was both sneaky and prolific with his attacks. Neil was hard pressed to maintain shields and healing on both Sophie and Humphrey, but he smoothly churned out spell after spell, power after power, all with impeccable timing.

Sophie's damage was too negligible to be a real threat to Zato, relegating her to the frustrating but critical role of meat shield. The one advantage of the constant attacks she was subjected to was that her powers grew stronger as she suffered attacks.

Her Karmic warrior power stacked up instances of two holy boons with every attack. One increased her power and spirit attributes, while the other reduced damage from subsequent attack by the same person. As with the fight with Nicolas Hendren, she was stacking up enough instances to have a real impact. On top of the damage reduction, the holy boons also combined with another of her powers.

Ability: [Strong Soul] (Mystic)

- Special ability (dimension).
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 3 (57%).

- Effect (iron): Disruptive-force damage dealt to you is reduced by a large amount; other damage dealt to you is reduced by a small amount. Resistance to dimensional or astral effects and energies is increased. You can physically interact with incorporeal entities.

- Effect (bronze): Increased curse, magic and unholy resistance. You cannot receive unholy boons. Each instance of a holy boon on you increases the damage reduction of this ability.

With each attack she received, Sophie's defences grew. The Agent of Karma boon made her tougher as it increased her power attribute and strengthened her magical abilities by enhancing the spirit attribute. This affected both the damage reduction from the Good Karma boon and the damage reduction from the Strong Soul power.

The layering bonuses didn't change Sophie's role as a meat-shield for projectiles, but it made her better able to weather the storm. She was still hopelessly outmatched, however. Beyond the simple disparity of silver-rank versus bronze-rank powers and physical abilities, she had to deal with the resistances of rank disparity that Humphrey's Hero's Drive power allowed him to ignore.

Humphrey had received the Giant's Might boon from Neil, adding weight to his special attacks that were the only real source of threat to their opponent. Zato was still stronger and tougher by a good margin, more so than the silver-rank essence user they had fought. If not for his superior skill and the support of his team, Humphrey wouldn't have been able to force Zato's attention as much as he did. Zato would have already broken through and ravaged their backline.

As resilience accumulated, Sophie was growing frustrated at her inability to have a real impact on the fight. As her power grew stronger as she soaked up more and more attacks, frustration became impatience. She knew she was a more than match for Zato's skill, and tired of passively intercepting attacks she dashed in, determined to make an impact.

Using her Eternal Moment power to massively accelerate, she unleashed a barrage of attacks. Her passive damage powers included resonating-force damage, which had been amplified by the boosts to her spirit attribute. With her fleeting, time-stopped moment, she unleashed a furious flurry of strikes, all of which took effect as she returned to the normal passage of time.

Zato's whole body rippled at the accumulated impact. He immediately retaliated by growing a half-dozen extra arms that ended in hammers, rather than fists. They swung in on Sophie, who could have dodged but didn't. Instead, she used her Moment of Oneness power to absorb the blows and then deliver all the damage back with an elegant palm strike that punched a large indentation in his torso.

Despite having a huge dent into his chest, Sophie saw Zato's grin and realised she had made a mistake. After baiting out her power to absorb a strong attack, Zato used one of his trump cards and his whole body exploded into a huge mass of shrapnel.

Humphrey was the most physically resilient of the team, but he was also very close and very large, courtesy of Neil's spell. His armour softened the blow, but more than a few chunks of shrapnel pierced right through it.

Sophie had her accumulated damage resistance, which was the only reason she survived. She was quick enough to shield her head with her arms, which were flayed along with the entire front of her body. Her accumulated damage reduction and light armour weren't even close to absorbing that level of damage and her armour was shredded to ribbons, along with most of the skin on the front of her body.

Clive, Neil and Belinda didn't suffer the attack as the shrapnel stopped in the air, forming a perfect sphere, then reversed course. The metal shard flew back together to reform Zato's body. It wasn't just a matter of returning him to the state he had been in,

however. Zato was unmarred and unharmed, having repaired not just the damage from Sophie but all the damage Humphrey had managed to build up.

Humphrey was severely injured and Sophie was a bloody wreck, barely standing upright. Their enemy was completely refreshed, his silver skin perfect and unmarred. Every bit of the damage they had done had been undone in a moment.

“You really should have submitted,” Zato told them imperiously. “Now you are going to suffer.”

Chapter 257

The Power of Friendship

Once again, the team's pinpoint timing salvaged a very poor situation from what would otherwise have been a total disaster. Sophie used the last of her strength to throw out a bloody fist, barely able to lift an arm from which half the muscle had been shredded. As she did, Neil's Bolster ability landed, enhancing the power the punch carried.

Ability: [Deny the Reaper] (Balance)

- Special Attack (counter-execute, healing).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.

- Current rank: Bronze 2 (16%).

- Effect (iron): Target enemy suffers a small amount of transcendent damage and you are healed for a small amount. As a counter-execute effect, the damage and healing scale exponentially with your own level of injury.

- Effect (bronze): Provides a heal-over-time effect. Healing scales exponentially with your own level of injury at the time the ability was used.

With Sophie's bedraggled state, plus the boosts to her spirit attribute and the enhancement from Neil's spell, it was by far and away the most potent use of a power she had ever executed. The healing it provided was near-miraculous, knitting together muscle and regrowing skin between one breath and the next. Even with perfect circumstances, though, it was not enough healing to fully restore her condition. The ongoing heal component of the ability started going to work, aided by a life bolt spell from Neil.

Sophie's fist was buried in his chest and she yanked it out with an unpleasant wet sound. Her hand glistened with liquid silver, mixed with a little blood, although that could easily have been hers. Her body began emitting an amber glow.

"Gift evolution!" Clive exulted through voice chat. "I'd put money down on it being a rank-jumping power."

-
- Celestine racial ability [Astral Affinity] has evolved to [Boundary Breaker].

Ability: [Boundary Breaker]

- Transfigured from [Celestine] ability [Astral Affinity].
- Increased resistance to dimension effects and astral forces. Dimension abilities have increased effect and transcendent damage is increased.
- Ignore the enhanced resistances derived from rank disparity. This only affects the enhanced resistance from being higher rank, not other sources of resistance.
- Ignore the enhanced aura suppression and aura suppression resistance derived from rank disparity. This only affects the enhanced effects from being higher rank, not the inherently superior strength of higher-rank auras.

The rest of the team sent their congratulations, even as they kept fighting, but Sophie herself was conflicted. She had received what she needed most of all, but not from a triumph but a costly mistake.

“It’s not about the reward you earned,” Humphrey told her. “It’s about the lesson you learned.”

Much of the wisdom Humphrey had to offer were saying that had been drilled into him by his mother. This statement very much had the cadence of that, which mollified Sophie somewhat. She had come to respect Danielle a lot when Danielle helped her get a handle on some of her powers that were similar to Danielle’s own.

Humphrey found himself in an odd position in the wake of Zato’s explosive power, where he was both too damaged and not damaged enough. He needed healing to get back into a state ready to fight Zato, as a half-recovered state would quickly be punished. He did have his Immortality power but he was not so damaged that he wanted to use it. Even after her self heal, though, Neil was focusing his healing on Sophie. Humphrey knew it was the right choice, given that Sophie could inherently suffer fewer hits than he could himself.

He made a decision and pulled a potion vial from his belt and downed the contents. It was a silver-rank health tonic they had taken from Nicolas Hendren, the over-ranked potion giving Humphrey an overcharged burst of healing. The price was that the magic would linger, meaning that the fight would be done one way or another before he could use another potion. It was the best compromise he could think of, not fully healing him, but letting him recover enough to keep up the fight while keeping Immortality in his pocket.

As for Zato, he had suffered the first true blow of the fight that inflicted real, lasting damage. His last attack had completely healed him from the slow build-up of damage he had sustained from the team's earlier attacks. The transcendent damage from Sophie's counter-execute, though, went through him like his body was made of water. It didn't care about his rank or the metal that had replaced his flesh. Not even the power the Builder had gifted him with could withstand that power.

The odd pause following Sophie's strike was ended by Clive. He hadn't made a large impact on the fight, throwing out a few buff spells before drawing out ritual circles as fast as he could, which turned out to be pretty damn fast. He'd always been a strong ritualist, but months of throwing out combat rituals had honed his skills to a fine point. In this case, his circles empowered his weapons and reconfigured their damage from disruptive to resonating force. Having finished his preparations, the twin blast from his wand and staff was the starter's gun for the next phase of the fight.

Jason was playing mouse to the Builder's cat. The frenzy of stampeding monsters fighting with cultists and constructs made it hard for the Builder to easily sense him. The vessel's senses had been enhanced beyond what Thadwick had possessed but to an entity of the Builder's power, even diamond-rank senses would have felt like blindness.

A seemingly incongruous aspect of auras was that the more powerful they were, the harder they were to detect if their owner didn't want them to be. The feeble aura of an iron ranker was easy to pick out, while the potent aura of a gold-rank soul was easily hidden. The key was control, with a stronger soul able to exert more control over the strength radiating out of it. This was assuming that a person had an aura power, therefore meeting the minimum requirements to exert that control. As Farrah had once warned Jason, a powerful soul with no means to control it was unruly to the point of being dangerous.

Jason's expertise with aura control was quite possibly the area in which he excelled the most, which was combined with an aura strength realms beyond the ordinary. It was a strength born of his close call with the elemental tyrant, his meeting with the gods and, more than anything else, his soul battle the Builder itself. The result was an aura strength more akin to a silver-ranker than a bronze.

Jason's expert control and formidable aura power combined with the ability Gordon granted of making his soul even harder to detect. The result was that even the enhanced silver-rank senses the Builder's vessel produced had a hard time picking out Jason's presence.

Hidden amongst the teeming monsters, Jason was not just a mouse, but a mouse with an invisibility cloak in a pile of other mice. Unfortunately, the Builder was a cat with a flamethrower. It had begun the chase with little understanding of its vessel's limitations but it was a very quick study. It had gone from crude attacks to destructive waves of rippling earth spikes that maximised power and area with as little strain on the vessel as possible.

There was an inevitable cost to repeatedly channelling power, the strain on the vessel beginning to show as it grew increasingly pale. It was an acceptable rate of decay, given that the Builder's design was already in motion. So long as Asano and his companions were kept from interfering, the situation would resolve itself without further intervention from his vessel.

The Builder's powers all involved manipulating the physical material around it. Simply reshaping it had the least cost, thus the spike waves that were a simple reshaping on the stone underfoot. Imbuing materials with additional power, was more costly. This ranged from imbuing it with disruptive-force to harm incorporeal entities to animating the material, like a short-lived construct creature. The effect that levied the greatest cost to the builder's form was transmuting one material into another, such as stone into steel.

The Builder was sweeping whole swathes of the battlefield in spike waves, even as its senses probed for Jason. It didn't care what got in its way, be that monster, construct or converted. Even the Builder's own cultists were mowed down ruthlessly as wedge-shaped chunks were cut out of the stampeding crush with every wave of impaling spikes.

The Builder was single-minded and methodical in its pursuit of Jason, but Jason nonetheless took the effort to provoke it. Having one of Shade's bodies move close enough to speak through allowed him to constantly harass the great astral being.

"Do you have a name outside of just 'the Builder?' It doesn't come across as imposing as you seem to think. It just makes you sound like an intergalactic brickie. Actually, I take it back; that sounds kind of awesome. Invaders from beyond the stars is done to death. A guy from beyond the stars who knocks up an outdoor dunny while unrepentantly flashing bum crack? That's a fresh idea. You might want to write this down, mate. I'm giving you gold, here."

"I will be giving you unimaginable torment soon enough."

"Oh, nice. Solid villain line; good job on the banter. You've already tried shaving chunks of my soul off like lemon zest, though, so I'm pretty sure I can imagine it. Having my friends kill me though? That's a prick move. I'm pretty sure my friends are going to beat your friends, though."

"I am beyond your mortal imagining. I have no friends."

“Well that’s just sad. Not because of the loneliness thing, although that too. You just admitted defeat.”

“There is no defeat. My will is inexorable.”

“Mate, this is the climactic battle and I’m the only one rocking the power of friendship. You’ve got no chance. You better knock out a back-story flashback toot-sweet or it’ll be a total walkover.”

As demonstrated when it sent Nicolas Hendren after the team, the Builder had some ability to track Jason’s location through the bond to his familiar. For this reason it tolerated Shade’s presence without eradicating the familiar’s body. Jason knew this as well as the Builder, but kept Shade nearby anyway. While he knew there was no goading the Builder any more than he already had, he needed the Builder to have at least some idea of his location. It allowed him to lead the Builder and his destructive power away from the team.

Despite Sophie’s heavy blow on Zato and a timely gift evolution to give her a greater impact on the fight, it had not been the turnaround moment that the team needed. While her attacks were more effective, she still needed to spend most of her time dealing with the projectiles Zato continuously hurled at Neil. Her power upgrade meant that she was able to deal with the attacks without taking the same level of damage but it was still eating into time she would rather use to pile on damage.

Belinda assisted Sophie in this regard, splitting her attention between keeping monsters off their backline and playing meat shield for Neil against Zato projectile attacks. She had activated her warrior-form power, Counterfeit Combatant, and was sporting heavy armour and a large shield, along with a long-handled war hammer.

No matter how much damage they inflicted, Zato was the immovable object to their apparently stoppable force. Aside from the one gaping wound in his chest, which did not seem to impair his combat ability, even Humphrey’s powerful attacks achieved little more than superficial dents. The more they attacked, the more their enemy seemed dishearteningly indestructible.

Clive had entered the fray, blasting away with his ritual-enhanced weapons. While the results were visible, they were as minimal as everything else and Zato insultingly disregarded Clive’s threat, continuing to hammer of Humphrey and Sophie while trying to land a decisive strike on Neil.

The team was not without their own gains, with Neil’s perception power giving them a slight edge. Its ability to see vulnerabilities was something he normally used for assessing the team’s injuries, but it also spotted one of Zato’s few vulnerabilities.

“Parts of his body become fluid when he uses a shape changing power,” Neil alerted the others through voice chat. The ability to communicate without being overheard or needing to yell over other noises was a critical element of facilitating teamwork. “If you can time a disruptive-force attack instead of a resonating one in just the right moment, you’ll do some extra damage.”

In spite of the team refining their attacks, the power gap remained. Even with Sophie’s growing might, Zato was too strong, too tough and boasted too many forms of attack. Even with the team’s focus on keeping Neil safe, Zato’s attacks would still sometimes get through and land some damage on the healer.

The team retained more injuries as Zato’s damage started outpacing Neil’s healing. The team’s key cooldown powers were used at critical moments, not to swing the battle in their favour but to keep it from getting away from them entirely. Humphrey’s Immortality, Belinda’s full cooldown reset. Their last trump card was Neil’s Hero’s Moment power, but it would cripple whoever it was used on when the power ended. Until they would get within striking range of finishing the job, it was a power that was off-limits.

Despair started to set in as they looked down the barrel of what seemed like Zato’s inevitable victory. They could not deal enough damage, the gap normally filled by Jason, but it was clear his powers would not work against Zato’s silver body. In any case, Jason had his own overwhelming enemy to face.

“You really thought you could derail the Builder’s design?” Zato taunted. He sensed that victory was close and tried to push to his enemies’ morale to the breaking point. “We have been planning this longer than any of you have been alive. You thought to stop the efforts of years with your meagre abilities and pathetic ideals? You think that you possess the power to undo all that we have wrought? You won’t just fail here. You won’t die. Your souls will be taken. You will each become weapons against everything you love and all you sought to protect.”

Humphrey’s weariness and the seeming futility of his efforts had eaten away at his spirit. He rallied his determination but Zato’s words stirred up fear of become exactly what Zato said, a weapon against his own people. Exhausted, he watched, sword hanging limply from his hands as Zato and Sophie engaged in a wild struggle. As her power grew over time she had been taking on more of Humphrey’s frontline role. Humphrey told himself to move, to lift up his sword and keep going, but his arms wouldn’t move.

Just as he was on the verge of giving up, his mother, Danielle, appeared out of nowhere and slapped him hard across the face. He stumbled, startled as she glared at him in fury.

“What is your name?” she demanded, her voice hammering down with righteous anger.

He looked at her in confusion, then his eyes went wide. His shoulders firmed as he stood up straight, resolve returning to his posture. He had not recovered stamina or mana. He had not been healed. His Immortality was long gone, used and used again when Belinda reset it. He had received no fresh boons, gained no extra power. All that changed was his resolve.

Humphrey head swung on a pivot, from his mother to Zato, who ignored him while trying to overwhelm Sophie while Humphrey was flagging. Humphrey’s gaze locked onto the enemy as his mother turned back into Belinda and returned to where the familiars were holding the line against the monsters.

Humphrey hefted his dragon sword in one hand and hurled it, spinning end over to end to clang off Zato’s head before dissolving into nothing. The attack did not harm Zato but it got his attention and he wheeled on Humphrey.

Zato knew that his victory was imminent. He knew that the adventurers were no match for his power. They were a spent force; an arrow at the end of its flight. Their situation was hopeless, their defeat certain. But for a single, fleeting moment, passing as quickly as it came, something he saw in Humphrey’s eyes sent a chill to the very core of his soul.

“My name,” Humphrey announced, stepping forward one slow step at a time, “is Humphrey Francis Eugene Geller. My family have been adventurers for sixteen generations. We aren’t alchemists or weaponsmiths on the side. We aren’t ritualists or scholars. For hundreds of years we have done one thing, and one thing only: protect our world from people like you. You say that we aren’t ready? That we can’t match your years of preparation? We’ve been preparing for you for sixteen generations, and do you know what we’ve been building to for all that time?”

Humphrey raised his arm to point at Zato and a sword appeared in his hand. Not the heavy, powerful dragon sword, but the light razor wing sword, aimed right at his enemy.

“We’ve been building,” Humphrey said, “to me.”

Amber light flooded out of Humphrey as he stood, sword levelled at Zato. The team and Zato both stood stock-still.

“Gift evolution?” Neil wondered through the voice chat. “Humphrey had all his gift evolutions. Is it even possible for that to happen again?”

“No,” Clive said, his voice dazed as he looked on. “But I don’t think he cares.”

The amber light shining out of Humphrey turned blood crimson.

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- Human racial ability [Attack of the Mirage Dragon] has evolved to [Hero's Sacrifice].
 - You have evolved an already evolved ability, breaching the limitations of your soul's potential. You will experience a brief surge of enhanced power, followed by a significant backlash.

Ability: [Hero's Sacrifice]

- Transfigured from evolved ability [Attack of the Mirage Dragon].
 - Previous effects of racial ability [Attack of the Mirage Dragon] have been lost.
 - Sacrifice your health to enhance the power of your special attacks.
-

"I'll use Hero's Moment," Neil said through the voice chat. It allowed the team to communicate silently as no one moved in the strange stillness. Humphrey and Zato stood facing one another, eyes locked.

"If you're going to going to crap out soon anyway..." Neil said.

"No," Humphrey responded firmly. "Red tights."

"No!" Sophie exclaimed. "I can't just leave you here alone! You'll all be dead by the time..."

"It's the only way," Humphrey cut her off. "We'll hold until you get back."

"But..."

"RUN!" Humphrey roared out loud and the spell was broken. He and Zato lunged at each other, Zato sprouting four extra arms, each ending in razor-sharp axe blades. He lashed out with the full speed of his silver rank attributes and the enhanced strength of his metal body.

Humphrey's skill had been a match for Zato's the entire fight. Just as he had said, he was trained from birth for the life of an adventurer. Sixteen generations of knowledge and experience had been poured into him, the Geller family a foundry for the strongest steel. Martial techniques, combat philosophies and insights formed by centuries of adventurers, refined and distilled into the latest generation of a grand tradition.

From the beginning, Humphrey had been pitting his lesser strength against Zato's greater, caught up in the idea of needing as much power as he could muster. Once he accepted that he could never muster enough power, the tenor of their combat entirely transformed.

Six blades came at Humphrey. He parried four and dodged two with a grace that he had spent the whole fight surrendering in the name of strength. He didn't have Zato's speed but his technique and economy of motion more than compensated, his razor wing

sword moving in an elegant dance. Not only did he evade the attacks, but he immediately retaliated, raking his sword across Zato's body.

Blood seeped from Humphrey's eyes as he used his new Hero's Sacrifice gift, but for all Humphrey's grand declarations, Zato had not grown any weaker. Humphrey's sword was lighter and less powerful than his dragon sword, barely slicing a shallow line across his enemy.

"That's it?" Zato mocked. "All that big talk, light shining out like you're some mighty hero, and that's all you can muster? You'll have to do a lot better than that!"

"I'm working on it," Humphrey shot back, his sword continuing to snake over Zato.

Ability: [Relentless Assault] (Might)

- Special Attack (counter-execute, healing).
- Cost: Low stamina, increasing with each attack.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.

- Current rank: Bronze 2 (16%).

- Effect (iron): Each use of this attack in quick succession increases the damage of this attack. Damage is of the same type caused by a normal attack.

- Effect (bronze): After a threshold of successive attacks is reached, escalating resonating-force damage is dealt with each attack.

In the brief moment that Zato and Humphrey had been clashing, Sophie stood ready to run as Neil used his bolster spell on Belinda, enhancing her next power. Belinda then used her Mirror Magic ability to copy the spell, using the bolstered version of Neil's own Bolster spell back on him.

Neil was unable to use Bolster on himself, but Belinda's power to mimic spells not only let him do so, but made it doubly effective with the Bolster enhancing itself. He then used the double-strength Bolster to cast a massively empowered Hero's Moment spell, which he used not on Humphrey, but on Sophie. It was what she had been waiting for and she erupted away from the team, flooded with a terrifying power. She fled the site of the battle, vanishing into the ongoing monster brawl around them.

Humphrey continued to clash with Zato, lashing out again and again. Blood ran from his eyes, nose and ears as he chained his Relentless Assault attacks. He could taste the blood, copper in his mouth as he enhanced every attack with his new power. The escalating cost of the special attack increasingly sapped his stamina as Hero's Sacrifice sapped his health.

He ignored both as he continued his flowing stream of attacks, cutting away at Zato, not with a hammer but with a scalpel. Despite this, his attacks still had limited effect and would continue to do so until he reached his special attack's resonating-fierce threshold.

Despite Humphrey's skill, the damage was not a one-way street. His own attacks were hurting himself as much as they were Zato, yet he did not relent to use his new power. Zato was raining his own attacks down on Humphrey, who was coming off worse from the exchange. It was only a continuous stream of healing and shields from Neil that allowed him to struggle on.

Humphrey's fluid expertise and rapid strikes reached the resonating force threshold of his special attack in fairly short order. The harsh reality, though, was that even with his new ability and the surge of power that came from awakening it was simply not enough. Zato's body remained all but impervious, even as the special attack escalated to potent levels. Zato was taking dents, but nothing he couldn't shrug off.

Zato realised that he had been dragged into Humphrey's pace, suddenly remembering that he was the one with the power. He was the one with the advantage. Sophie was gone and Humphrey's attacks were all show, with no genuine threat behind them. With that realisation, Zato turned his attention once more to the healer. Once Neil was dealt with, the fight was as good as over.

Zato left Humphrey behind and dashed at Neil, only to be struck with a reality of his own; Humphrey was part of a team. Clive's Juxtaposition spell swapped Neil and Humphrey's positions, leaving Zato once again facing off against Humphrey, whose special attack sequence continued unabated.

While the team's big-ticket powers had been spent, they still had a variety of tricks up their sleeve that could buy them precious moments, whether for Humphrey's attack to grow stronger or for Sophie to come back.

Chapter 258

A War of Stolen Moments

Sophie was dashing through the camp like a spectre, swift, ghostly and untouchable. She ended up running along the inside of the wall and onto the top, sprinting along it to reach her maximum speed. With a double-enhanced Hero's Moment empowered every speed ability she had, even she felt like her breakneck speed was wild and precarious. She did not relent on the pace, whatever she felt, as speed was the only objective.

Ability: [Avatar of Speed] (Swift)

- Special ability.
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 3 (86%).

- Effect (iron): Your movement abilities have increased effect and reduced stamina and mana cost.

- Effect (bronze): Periodically gain instances of [Momentum] while moving at speed. The greater the speed, the faster instances are accrued.

With every moment, more and more stacks of Momentum were gathered. She kept moving, determined to drain every drop out of the Hero's Moment spell.

"How are you holding up?" she asked through voice chat.

"Quite well, thank... argh!" Jason's voice came through.

"Good to know, but I think she meant us," Clive said. "We're doing the flasher move you came up with."

"The what?" Jason asked.

"The guy with the red tights," Clive said.

"The Flash, not the flasher," Jason said. "Also, they're not tights."

"They sounded like tights, the way you described them," Neil chimed in.

"I think we're all a little busy for this conversation!" Belinda yelled.

Jason had given up taunting with Shade. The Builder had thinned out the monsters and even his own forces as he scoured the camp for Jason. It was becoming increasingly hard to both stay ahead of the Builder and clear of the team, with more than a couple of near misses as the Builder came close to snatching him up.

He had been injured several times and had been using the monsters as a source of life drain, randomly laying out afflictions as he went. That was becoming harder and harder as the Builder continued to thin out the herd.

The close calls were getting closer with every passing moment. Frustrated that the greatest contribution he could make was running away, he desperately willed the team to success.

The tyranny of rank was an inescapable reality. For all that Humphrey's morale was renewed and reinvigorated, his body was not. He had reached the point that little more than will alone kept him moving. His body was ravaged by Zato's attacks and his own ability in equal parts. The team's bag of tricks was running low and Humphrey's stamina had reached its limit. His attacks had finally started doing real damage, but while his spirit was willing, his body was spent. He stumbled, faltering, breaking the chain of attacks he had almost miraculously maintained through nothing but muscle memory and willpower.

Zato had taken some real hits and a magic tattoo appeared on his body, shining brightly before dimming. Belinda recognised it as the upgraded version of her own magic tattoo that reset the cooldown of an ability. Hers had disappeared with her ascension to bronze rank and she was chilled as she saw it appear on Zato. She knew what power he wanted to use again.

Every member of the team had a gold spirit coin to use in absolutely clutch moments. Steeling herself, Belinda slipped it into her mouth to ensure the special attack that followed would work.

Ability: [Power Thief] (Magic)

- Special attack (boon, affliction, magic)
 - Cost: Very high mana.
 - Cooldown: 5 minutes.

 - Current rank: Bronze 3 (32%).

 - Effect (iron): Make a magical ranged attack. You become able to use a random active-use ability of the target, who cannot use that ability until you have done so. It can be an essence ability or the inherent ability of a magic creature, but functions at your rank, not the rank of the target. You may not use the ability more than once. This ability cannot be used again until the copied ability is used. If not used within 24 hours, the copied ability is lost, restoring the target's ability to use it.

 - Effect (bronze): You can choose a specific ability of the target. If the target does not have that ability, a random ability is stolen instead.
-

Zato roared with fury as a light flashed from Belinda's hand, striking Zato and zipping back to her in an instant. He had just used one of his biggest trump cards, making the explode-and-heal power that damaged Sophie so badly available once more, only to feel it snatched away.

Zato lunged at Belinda, still under the effects of her Counterfeit Combatant power, clad in armour and holding a long-handled war hammer. In his fury, Zato didn't notice the gold-rank aura emitting from Belinda, who met his charge with the hammer, with gold-rank strength behind it.

The blow staved in Zato's head, yet even that wasn't enough to do more than stagger the metal man. Belinda, by contrast, felt the coin's power drain away and collapsed under the weight of her own armour.

Humphrey was too exhausted to move and with Belinda sharing his fate through the use of her spirit coin, Clive and Neil were suddenly left vulnerable. Zato looked grotesque with the huge dent deforming his head, but he was only staggered for a short time. In spite of his hideous disfiguration, he fought on.

While Zato recovered, Onslow and Stash moved from the edge of the fight where they had been on monster shepherding duties, placing themselves between Zato and the last members of their team both present and standing.

Zato began to move on the valiant familiars but he didn't get to make his attack as Sophie returned to the battlefield in a blur of motion. The Hero's Moment spell was on the verge of ending, and she stuffed a gold spirit coin in her mouth as she arrived in front of Zato.

Between Neil's double-enhanced spell and the gold coin, only her temporarily gold-rank power attribute was enough to hold her body together with the absurd power coursing through it. She ignored the pain, slapping her palm into Zato's chest. All the Momentum she had built up over the duration of Neil's spell was triggered, the power multiplied again and again and again by the empowering effects layered onto her. The resulting attack had so much power that simply unleashing it made the air crash like thunder.

-
- **[Momentum] (boon, magic, stacking):** When making an attack, all instances are consumed to inflict resonating-force damage. Multiple instances can be accumulated and instances are lost quickly while not moving.
-

The seemingly indestructible Zato exploded into a rain of liquefied metal.

➤ You have defeated [Zato].

Jason grinned, but he knew that his true contribution started now. His team had done their part and all they needed was time. It was up to Jason to buy them that time.

He gave up hiding and appeared before the Builder, who was staring at the tower with a rare display of emotion on the vessel's face. It wasn't rage but affront. The great astral being was less confused by the success of the lowly mortals than it was by their temerity in stand in its path. Jason did so literally, planting his feet on the ground between the Builder and the tower.

"What did I tell you?" Jason said. "The power of friendship."

"Your friends will be the ones to kill you, still."

"You get your shot first, mate," Jason said. "Your opponent is right here."

"You cannot harm me."

"Should be an easy one for you, then."

"Pleasure is a mortal concept," the Builder mused. "Even in these vessels I have only felt it for no more than a few fleeting moments across a span of time longer than your species has existed. I think I will take pleasure in watching you suffer."

"I do aim to please," Jason said, drawing his sword. "Shall we?"

Shade's bodies spread out from Jason to surround the Builder, although Jason kept one in reserve. The Builder could easily damage incorporeal creatures and, assuming he got out alive, he would need one of Shade's bodies to reconstitute the rest.

Jason, the Builder and all the remaining monsters felt the shift in the tower's magic, starting from the base. With that, the Builder lost interest in Jason and started striding in the direction of the tower.

As they moved into the mid-range of bronze, the team had broken through the limitations that were part of human, or human-adjacent existence. They could run faster than any Olympic sprinter, with stamina that would make a marathon runner shudder.

Sophie and Belinda were slumped on top of Onslow's shell as the familiar zoomed up the ramp on a cushion of air. Belinda was barely conscious, while Sophie was barely alive. Neil's magical intervention had been the only thing that had prevented her body from giving out after the power she had sent coursing through it.

Humphrey was in no better a state. His new power had brought with it a surge of strength, but as that passed, the lingering soul damage had left him debilitated. He was

slung over the back of Stash in the shape of a heidel, desperately clinging to consciousness as he sought to see the task to completion.

Neil was running, along with the dragon-tooth warriors Humphrey had managed to summon before collapsing entirely. His own summon was too slow to keep up and had been left at the bottom to block anyone who tried to follow them up.

Clive also sat atop Onslow, carefully maintaining a ritual circle around the crystal cube floating in front of him. It was a device he had cobbled together from materials originally intended to open a path back home, a plan rendered moot by the changes to the astral space's ambient magic. He had repurposed the materials to create a device that would invert the towers magic. It was a process Jason has insisted on referring to as 'reversing the polarity.'

The function of the device was straightforward enough. They simply had to take it from the bottom of the tower to the top. If that were all there was to it, Clive could have simply handed it off to Sophie and let her run up the outside of the tower. The trick was that Clive's cobbled-together device was made from improvised components and worked in accordance with theories he was only just beginning to understand.

In order to keep it operational, Clive needed to keep it encircled in a magical diagram that he needed to alter in real time as they moved the device. It was a ludicrous feat only possible because of Clive's power that let him draw ritual circles in the air, combined with his incredible skills as a ritualist. Even then, only months of drawing out rituals in combat had honed his reflexes enough to keep up. It took every ounce of his concentration as they made the way up the spiralling ramp inside the tower.

"The Builder has to be coming, right?" Belinda asked. Her coin-hangover left her feeling fearfully vulnerable.

"All we can do is trust Jason," Humphrey said.

Jason Asano was a lot of things. Mouthy to people he really shouldn't be was certainly one of them, as the Builder had long discovered. The Builder was now discovering that for all the things Jason was, one thing that he was not was easy to ignore.

The strongest of the Builder's minions had, against all odds, fallen. It was finally forced to act personally to see its intentions fulfilled and had intended to leave the matter of Jason for later. While it might derive satisfaction from what it intended for the Rejector, its intentions for the world Asano struggled to protect took precedence.

The Builder didn't give a lot of thought to the vessels he occupied. Knowledge of the mortal form was something beneath it. It used and discarded the vessels as needed,

without regard for them. If it had ever thoroughly explored their memories, it might have known that there was such a thing as Achilles tendons.

The Builder's vessel was not as physically resilient as Zato's metal body, by any means. If the Builder could have eschewed a fleshy vessel then it would have. No artificial construct was sophisticated enough to contain its power, however. Only the magical matrix that operated the body of an essence user was sufficient, after appropriate modification.

A vessel might be far more sturdy than an ordinary body, but it still adhered to basic, physiological truths. One of them was that without certain muscles, it was a lot harder to stand up.

It taxed the body very little to repair the kind of small injuries that Jason was capable of inflicting. Those brief moments of delay, however, were more valuable than gold for the team rushing up the tower.

The Builder was striding away from Jason, ignoring him for the moment in the belief that Jason was unable to substantially damage its vessel, which was true. What Jason could do could do was educate the Builder on the critical areas where a small wound could cause specific, debilitating problems. Even if immediately healed, they stole away more of the precious moments.

Jason did not undertake this task alone. Colin's afflictions, as Jason suspected, were no more effective than his own. What Colin could do was teach the Builder that eyes did not respond positively to rings of pointy teeth.

Jason was only stealing moments, but he and the Builder both knew that moments counted. Recognising that ignoring Jason was hurting it, the Builder attacked. Crippling would be ideal but killing was acceptable. Asano's immediate fate was unimportant compared to the Builder's other goals, so long as that fate was decided by the Builder itself.

Pinning Jason down was easier said than done. The Builder was still limited by the physical integrity of its vessel and could only levy silver-rank attacks.

Although he was no longer running, Jason remained elusive, using Shade's bodies to jump around, avoiding the attacks the Builder made by reshaping the ground beneath him. Shade was likewise on the move, avoiding the force-wreathed projectiles the builder flung his way, providing Jason with an ever-shifting series of shadow-jump portals.

Now that he was forced into open combat, Jason knew that, for all his mobility, he would not be able to keep up the fight for long. Luckily, he didn't need to. The magic of the tower was an obnoxious presence to anyone with magical senses and the change that started at the bottom and was rapidly ascending was obvious.

The Builder was faced with a conundrum. It could wield a single burst of gold-rank power, but that would tax its vessel to breaking point. It was forced to decide between using that burst to put an instant end to Jason or save it for the rest of his team.

Ultimately, stopping the team was the imperative. The tower's magic made it clear that they were entering its upper reaches and the Builder needed to move swiftly. It shot up into the air on a rising column of stone and earth that carried up toward the open windows running up the outside of the tower. The column was a compromise that consumed the vessel faster than the Builder wanted, but left it with vitality enough for one burst of gold-rank power.

Again Jason proved himself an annoyance not so easily cast aside. He called out Gordon, still ragged from the Builder's earlier attack. Gordon's two resonating-force orbs shot out as Jason's direction, colliding as they met the column and exploding, cutting the column off.

The column collapsed and the Builder fell with it, although walked out of the resultant cloud of dirt and dust unharmed. Anger showed on its increasingly withered face, but was quickly schooled away. It looked up at the tower where the shift in magic was nearing the upper reaches. The Rejector's companions needed to be stopped, forcing the builder's hand. Its vessel started to wither in front of Jason as it invoked a gold rank power while reaching a hand toward the tower, which it clenched into a fist..

The tower was literally coming to life to impede the team. Stone flowed like water into crude, humanoid shapes; animated creatures that attacked the team even before they finished forming. They were no stronger than Humphrey's dragon-tooth warriors, but the team was already at the end of their tether with most of the team unable to fight. Stash left Humphrey to Neil as it took on a hydra form, barely able to fit on the ramp. They fought through the animated stone, but their progress was massively slowed.

Slowing the team gave the Builder time to crush the scurrying bug that was Jason. Gordon had been called back for safety, a choice proven well-made as the Builder abandoned any idea of maintaining its vessel, burning through its vitality with a storm of disruptive-force-empowered projectiles. As Shade's bodies were cut down one by one, the Builder started making something. The materials were conjured up from the ground, like everything else, but this was smaller, taking form more slowly and carefully. Stone was transmuted into metal and magic was imbued into the device.

Finally, Jason ran out of moments to steal. As Shade's bodies were cut down, Jason's mobility was cut down with them. Despite its increasingly decrepit state, the

Builder's vessel was still fast and powerful, dashing forward and grabbing Jason by the face. With its other hand it slapped the suppression collar it had made around his neck. The vessel continued to rapidly wither as another column rose up, carrying the Builder and his new pet towards the tower.

The team were aching close to the end of the ramp, leading up to the flat roof of the tower.

-
- Party leader [Jason Asano] has had his magical abilities suppressed.
 - Ability [Party Interface] has been negated.
 - Your party has been disbanded.
-

There were large, open windows placed regularly up the tower's length and the Builder stepped through one of them, blocking their path. It dragged Jason with it, holding his collar like a dog.

"You have done far better than I anticipated," the Builder told them. It was a withered husk, now, its voice inhuman and raspy. Even so, the team knew they would not be getting past it.

The Builder's eyes rested on the cube, floating in front of Clive.

"While I am not one to offer enemies second chances," the Builder said, "the brute-force enslavement of your souls would be a waste of good material. I offer you another chance to come willingly, which you should accept. Your souls will be mine either way."

Jason crawled pitifully in the direction of his friends, who looked on with miserable expressions. The Builder let him slink away. If Asano wanted a last moment of companionship before those companions were turned against him, he would just suffer all the more. Jason was not looking for companionship, however. He was looking for a run up.

Very few things truly surprised an entity as old as the Builder. Jason's aura pushing back the suppressive force of the collar was one of them. The collar's power was strong and Jason was only able to successfully push it back for a few scant seconds, but Jason's entire battle had been a war of stolen moments. It was time enough to retrieve a gold spirit coin from his inventory, which he slipped it into his mouth. Immediately he leapt up, exploding forward with gold-rank strength and speed.

The Builder was able to react, even against gold-rank reflexes, causing a wall of spikes to rise up between them. Jason ploughed right into it with his gold-rank power, impaling himself a dozen times but still breaking through with momentum to spare. Just as

he had smashed into the spiked wall, he smashed into the Builder, sending them both tumbling out through the window.

Still leaning on Clive for support, Humphrey had been ready to react from the moment he saw Jason acting submissively.

“GO!” he shouted, jolting the team into a final race against time. They raced the final stretch to top of the ramp, feeling the last of the tower’s magic turn as they stumbled onto the roof.

“That’s it,” Clive said. “The world engineers are done, as is the magic to let them penetrate our world.”

“The Job’s done, even if we die here,” Humphrey said.

“How about we don’t,” Clive said, dropping down off Onslow, then looked darkly toward the edge of the tower. “Not any more of us, anyway.”

Before leaving the tower at the edge of the city, they had removed the portal arch from the top and stowed it in Clive’s inventory. He pulled it back out and started drawing a ritual circle around it. If he was right, all the portals had opened, leading back to their own world. All he had to do was reconnect this one to the magical systems already in place and their path home would open.

Neil looked toward the edge of the tower.

“What about Jason?”

Humphrey’s face was filled with anguish, but also determination.

“He wouldn’t want us getting ourselves killed to bring back a corpse,” he said. “We open the gate and we go.”

Sprawled atop Onslow, Belinda gave the unconscious Sophie a worried glance, but said nothing.

Jason tried to yell something pithy about pants as he and the Builder tumbled through the air, but there was a stone spike through his neck. Everything was a blur as he spun around, and then it all went black.

-
- You have died.
 - All equipment has been returned to your inventory.
 - [World-Phoenix Token] has been consumed.
-

Chapter 259

Clive Takes Charge

Clive led the way through the portal, followed by Neil and then the familiars. Belinda and Sophie were atop Onslow, Sophie still unconscious and Belinda not much better off. Humphrey had insisted on bringing up the rear, despite remaining on his feet only with the assistance of Stash, who had replicated Humphrey's own form to provide a supporting shoulder.

They emerged in the ruins of the ancient village under the lake, the water held off by the magical dome maintained by Emir's people. There were numerous tables set up with magical paraphernalia, from the months of study the portal had undergone both before and after the team had gone through it.

There were no people present, until a sleepy-looking man emerged from one of the semi-intact buildings.

"Hester," he said, rubbing a face over bleary eyes. "I hope you remembered to bring the..."

He stopped dead still, realising the sounds that had roused him from his nap were not that of a supply run. He was suddenly very awake, his eyes pivoting from the team to the open portal arch they had just come through.

As he stood there looking stupid, Clive was already moving. Throwing a glance over the magical tools arrayed on the benches, he snatched up three small crystals in one hand while using the other to draw a magic circle in the air. It was vertical, placed between himself and the portal. As soon as it was complete, he threw the crystals through it one after the other. The first lit up with a blue-grey light before passing into the portal, the second an amber light and the third a cool silver light.

"What is it?" Humphrey asked, limping over.

"I suspected that opening the portal this way would eliminate the rank-gating, which I have just proven," Clive said. "We need to get the strongest adventurers we can get in short order and go back for Jason."

"We can't be sure where Emir and the Remores are," Humphrey said. "My family estate always has silver-rankers on site."

Clive didn't pause to discuss, pointing a finger at the ground. He moved it around in a large circle and runes appeared to form a ring in response. When the rune circle was complete, a portal shimmered to life in the middle of it. Clive stepped through, Humphrey managing to follow under his own steam.

The Builder landed on its feet, dropping to a crouch as Asano's body crunched into the ground nearby. It felt the magic of the tower complete its transition, the cascade of power that had been flowing into the world engineers now irreversibly inverted. The giant golems were nothing more than power sources for the portals, now.

The Builder did not fume with rage. It was older than the species of creatures it could sense scrambling around at the top of the tower, begrudging them neither their resistance nor their success. They were fighting for their lives and their world and the Builder had weathered setbacks before. This was but a battle in a world-spanning war.

It turned to Asano, who did raise the Builder's ire. It could weather the failure of its minions but the Builder and Asano had clashed directly, will to will. Its inability to force Asano into capitulation before the star seed gave out had been the Builder's personal failure and Asano still needed to be put in his place.

Asano was dead but that did not have to be the end. The astral space had no god of death to guide the soul into the astral; it would have to slowly drift into the Reaper's grasp on its own. That gave the Builder a window to act.

As it considered this, Asano's combat robe vanished. A glow lit up from within his body, which started radiating heat. The Builder felt the surge of a familiar power and was filled with a fury that no mortal, even one as frustrating as Asano, could engender.

"World-Phoenix."

The Builder abandoned its vessel which fell to the ground, an abandoned puppet.

Along with the permanent guard contingent, the guards of the Geller Estate included elites from the family itself. Basic duties were a core part of the Geller training ethos, teaching both diligence and humility. Humphrey had spent time guarding the estate, as had his mother before him, and he would be assigned to do so again in the future.

When Clive's portal appeared in the atrium of the Geller Estate's main house, the two Geller family guards went on alert. Clive heard this as he stepped through the portal, glanced around and found the pair of bronze-rankers pointing weapons at him inadequate to his needs. Humphrey followed him out of the portal and waved down the guards.

"Young Master Humphrey!"

Clive casually fired a blast from his staff into the high ceiling. It left spiderweb cracks in the magically-reinforced glass of the atrium skylight, but it was the secondary effect he had wanted to trigger. Sounds of alarm rang out around the estate.

Humphrey's sister, Henrietta, had been on guard duty outside and rushed in with the first wave of respondents, spotting Humphrey.

"Hump!"

She didn't get the chance to talk as more people poured in, both guards and Geller family members, ready to fight. Humphrey and Henrietta were trying to calm things down when Danielle arrived in a blur, her conjured dimensional blade ready at hand. Her eyes went wide on seeing her son.

In the midst of the commotion, Clive's voice cut over the noise, its fierce and commanding timbre startling those who knew him.

"Lady Geller," he barked. "Gather the strongest force you can immediately muster and teleport them to the portal arch under the lake."

Not waiting for a response, Clive stepped back through the portal, completely disregarding the chaos left in his wake.

Humphrey looked between his mother and the portal.

"What he said," Humphrey added. "Seconds matter."

He followed Clive back through the portal. As the passage of four bronze-rankers was the limit of Clive's portal, it closed behind him.

The ghoul had no memory. It barely had a sense of self at all. Its body was still strong but it felt weak. It knew it should be much stronger. It knew that it was dying. More than anything else, it knew hunger.

Hunger was the ghoul's identity. Hunger was its purpose. It opened its eyes and pushed itself to its feet. There was a body on the ground, rich with power but burning with a heat it that every instinct told it to run from. Run it did, feeling the magic around it, looking for sustenance.

There was much activity, but the ghoul paid it no mind. It cared only for magic that it could feed on, which was not present within the teeming throng fighting around it. Empty vessels made of stone and false souls in bodies filled with worthless magic were of no use to it. The only true souls were tainted and poisoned.

Spreading its senses further, it detected pristine souls far above it. It turned its gaze upward, only for those souls to vanish, one by one. The ghoul let out a roar of frustration.

"Lord Builder?"

The ghoul turned to face the person talking at it. It was one of the worthless, tainted souls.

"No," the tainted soul. "Thadwick?"

Some murky thought fought its way clear of the hunger consuming the ghoul's mind. This tainted soul's name was Timos. It didn't matter, since it could not sate the ghoul's hunger. The tainted soul scrambled away and the ghoul let it go. It was neither obstacle nor sustenance, leaving the ghoul's mind the moment it was out of sight.

The ghoul picked up on something else. Something distant but rich and incredibly potent. Even far away it could smell it. It set out at a loping run. None of the things around it challenged it, rather scrambling to get out of its path.

Clive paced back and forth in front of the portal as he waited, the passage of every second an interminable wait. Danielle had mustered a small army of bronze-rankers, who appeared around the portal arch. She had also dragged along another silver-ranker, her husband, Keith. She took in the open portal, the bedraggled state of the team and immediately spotted the absence.

"Where's Jason?"

"He held back the Builder so we could get clear," Clive said, already striding toward the arch. "The rank-gate on the portal is gone. Follow me."

Neil moved into step with Clive and they went back through the arch. Humphrey was the only other team member with the mobility to go, but held back, face filled with anguish. He knew he would be more liability than asset until the after-effects of the potions he had taken passed and he could replenish his mana and stamina.

Danielle threw him a glance, seeing his nod before leading her people through after Clive. Henrietta approached Humphrey as the others passed through the portal.

"What happened to Clive?" she asked.

"The same thing that happened to all of us," Humphrey said darkly.

The Geller force emerged on the tower top from the rigged portal Clive had set up for the team's escape. The tower was some thirty storeys high, further up than any of them had expected and higher than most of them had ever been.

Clive had already reached the edge of the tower drawing out a magic circle with one hand as he perused a book held in the other. While his spirit attribute reaching bronze had a positive effect on his already prodigious memory, there were far more rituals than he could ever memorise. This included the slow-fall ritual he drew out, which took the form of a floating ring as it was completed, hovering off the edge of the tower.

"Everyone who doesn't have a flight or slow-fall power, use this," he announced to the group, then leapt off the tower and through the ring. Neil didn't hesitate to follow.

Danielle rushed to the edge of the tower, looking down. At the base of the tower was a wild battle of constructs and macabrely altered people, akin to those she had fought in the desert astral space. It was all contained within a wall that ringed the tower.

Her people followed, with her husband joining her at the edge of the tower.

“There are silver-rank monsters down there,” her husband said, prompting her for direction. “What did we send our boy into?”

“Let’s go find out,” she announced loudly, then jumped through Clive’s magic ring.

An unattended soul was a greater bounty than the ghoul could ever have expected, let alone one so powerful. It floated around a sword in a block of crystal that the ghoul ignored, interested only in the transcendent light of the soul. It plunged itself into that light, which soaked into it like rain on desert earth, sating an insatiable hunger and bringing forth a grand transfiguration.

The ghoul’s ruined body was not just replenished but transformed, bursting with strength and saturated with magic. Even so, the miraculous effect on its body paled in comparison to the changes affected on its soul.

The Builder’s power had hollowed out Thadwick’s soul like a termite colony in a rotten log. What remained was an empty shell, broken and helpless. Feasting on that powerful soul instigated a powerful change, making whole what first the star seed and then the Builder itself had ruptured.

It was not a restoration of the soul. The result was not Thadwick; not as he had been. It was a new beast, something powerful and voracious. The wreckage of Thadwick’s body, mind and soul was the foundation from which it built itself. The body and soul were reconstituted, the brain still holding Thadwick’s memories. It also held a few scattered fragments left behind by the Builder’s alien and unfathomable mind.

As the last of the soul was consumed, the object it had been encapsulating remained. On a plain, stone plinth was a sinister black and red sword, encased in crystal. As the last skerrick of soul vanished, tiny cracks started appearing in the crystal, glowing red and leaking wisps of black smoke.

The intervention of the Geller force eventually brought the wild chaos to order. Danielle dispatched people to open the gates and give an outlet for the frenzied monsters to stampede out of. The blank-faced converted that had once been Purity priests were now macabre monstrosities and were cut down, while the cult’s constructs were shattered to

pieces. There were no surviving cultists, all either dead or fled by the time the Geller's arrived.

Danielle went over to where Clive and Neil were standing, numb, some distance from Jason's body. There was no question of its state, with death offering no dignity. The fall had been unkind, as had the stone spikes impaling his body.

They could not get close, even to cover the body, because of an intense heat radiating from it. It was lit up with an internal glow, as if a fire were burning inside it. Bizarrely, it even affected Henrietta, whose fire essence gave her a power that should have shielded her from heat strong enough to melt stone.

"Any sign of the Builder?" Clive asked, not looking away from Jason. He was a little too close, the heat leaving his face glistening with sweat, but he didn't move.

"No," Danielle said. "You said he's in Thadwick's body?"

"Yes," Neil said. "We only saw him briefly, though, and he was barely recognisable. I think the Builder's power left him more dead than alive."

"If he's here, we'll find him," Danielle said. "How stable is that portal, Clive?"

"Intractable," Clive said. "It would be harder to close than it was to open."

"Don't let your people just run off exploring, though," Neil said. "This place has dangerous secrets, and the monsters have grown stronger."

"What is that fire?" Clive wondered aloud, eyes still locked on Jason's corpse. "Did the Builder do something to Jason's soul?"

"We'll figure it out," Neil said, moving closer to put a hand on Clive's shoulder. "We won't let this stand. We'll find a way to..."

Neil trailed off as wispy, rainbow smoke started rising up from Jason's body, which dissolved away completely in short order. All that remained was a horrid stench and the lingering heat.

With the dissolution of Jason's body, there was nothing else binding the team to the astral space and they were portalled back to Greenstone. In the wake of the astral space being opened, the site of the portal arch below the lake became a hub of activity, even more than when Emir, Clive and his people were trying to open it. The astral space was a realm of dangers and opportunities to be explored.

A few days after the portal had opened, more people arrived at the bottom of the lake to find everyone there dead. Especially concerting was that there were two silver-rankers among the fallen. In response, the three gold-rankers present in the city were dispatched to investigate.

Emir arrived, along with Rufus Remore's parents, Gabriel and Arabelle. The pair had remained in Greenstone to help Rufus launch the Remore Academy Training Annex. The last member of their old team, Cal, had departed Greenstone months earlier.

"Have you ever seen bodies like this?" Emir asked Arabelle. She was a healer and more familiar with various forms of death than the other two. The corpses looked normal to ordinary vision, but to magical senses they seemed desiccated and drained, so bereft of magic that they were like holes in the ambient magic around them.

"Energy vampire," Arabelle said. "A strong one."

"I'll talk to Hester about portalling Cal back here," Emir said. "We're going to need him if we're going to hunt this thing."

Chapter 260

Lessons

Asano was dead but that did not have to be the end. The astral space had no god of death to guide the soul into the astral; it would have to slowly drift into the Reaper's grasp on its own. That gave the Builder a window to act.

As it considered this, Asano's combat robe vanished. A glow lit up from within his body, which started radiating heat. The Builder felt the surge of a familiar power and was filled with a fury that no mortal, even one as frustrating as Asano, could engender.

"World-Phoenix."

The Builder abandoned its vessel which fell to the ground, an abandoned puppet.

On another world, a diamond ranker stood in the throne room of an imperial palace. His name was Shako and he had pale, freckled skin, wild red hair and eyes so brightly green they almost seemed to glow. Those eyes glared down at his descendants, the imperial family sprawled on the floor in supplication. There was no sign of the arrogance that had forged an empire planet-spanning empire.

The elaborate throne of gold and ivory was empty. The emperor was on his hands knees with the rest of the family, at the feet of their ancestor. Outside, the fires of rebellion were burning the imperial city to the ground.

"Ancestor," the emperor begged, not daring to raise his eyes from the floor. "Please reawaken the guardian golems, we beg you."

Shako had not needed to draw breath for centuries, yet he did so in order to sigh at the people arrayed before him.

"When I bestowed the golems on your ancestors, you were warned," Shako said. "Their purpose was to protect the dynasty, not as a tool of conquest. If used as such, then their power would be spent in the hour of greatest need. They were a gift from Builder, for assisting him in claiming the astral spaces of this world. But this gift was a shield, not a sword."

"We were foolish," the emperor beseeched. "Please, reawaken the golems and we will only use them as you have proscribed in the future. We have learned our lesson!"

"If I did so," Shako said, "then the lesson you learn will be that you can ignore the correct path because I will step forward to correct your mistakes. Your lesson is to be found with the armies outside. It will come at the hands of a world full of essence users you oppressed with the power you were given."

“Ancestor, I do not think that any of us will survive this lesson. Our diamond-rankers have abandoned us or even turned against us. Our enemies have put up a barrier that we cannot portal out of and only the relics you left behind have allowed us to hold out this long. If you cannot save our empire, then at least save our lives. Only your might can take us away from this place to safety.”

“When I was a boy,” Shako said, “our family were not kings but farmers. We understood that the seed you plant is the crop you harvest. You have sown the seeds of discord, fury and retribution. Now the harvest has come, the yield is heavy, and there is no one to blame but yourselves.”

“Ancestor,” the emperor said, finally looking up. “Will you truly let your bloodline die?” Shako laughed coldly.

“Is that what you were relying on? That I would not let my bloodline expire? You are not my only descendants in on this world. You are merely the ones that sought to leverage our connection to aggrandise yourselves instead of accomplishing anything on your own. My blood flows all across this world, in families that have heeded my lessons and treasured my gifts, instead of squandering them in pursuit of decadence and unearned glory. Many of them are even outside, leading the charge. They do not know that their revered ancestor is the same one their oppressors have used to justify their tyranny.”

Shako spat on the floor in front of the emperor.

“You have disgraced me. Used me as a banner under which you performed atrocity after atrocity. You beg me to act but I assure you, you would have nothing but regret if I did. It would not be to save you but to scourge you, in ways even the armies baying for your blood would balk at.”

Shako’s gaze turned to the empress. Through her aura he sensed her steeling herself and she rose to her feet, raising her eyes with determination.

“Ancestor,” she pleaded. “At least take the children. They are not to blame for the sins we have committed and are still young enough to learn better. Let the rest of us die, if you must, but do not make them pay the price for the transgressions of their forebears.”

“Wife,” the emperor snarled, looking up at the empress.

“No,” she shot back. “There is no saving us, husband. Do not be blind now, at least. At the end.”

The emperor opened his mouth to speak but did not as Shako’s aura fell on him like a boulder. Shako stepped up to the empress, who matched his gaze, even as her aura wavered fearfully.

“That figures,” Shako said. “The only person to show moral responsibility is the one that married into the family. It seems that the ability to grow a spine has been weeded out of my bloodline. Very well, Empress. I will take the children, and you. It is time this family learned the lessons of being farmers once more, so farmers you shall be. Of course, there is nowhere in this world that your name is not hated. You will have to hide it, lest anyone learn whose blood you are, for they will surely spill it. You will have enough to get by, and no more. There will be those who can teach you the ways of the land. I will visit in a few generations and see how you have done.”

Shako waved his hand and the empress vanished, along with the children gathered in the back.

“Ancestor...” the emperor managed to choke out. Shako ignored him, tilting his head as if listening to something.

“I have duties,” Shako said. “You have woven your own fates and I shall intervene no more. Thank you for reminding me of the other relics I left behind, Emperor. I shall take them with me.”

Shako vanished, the hope of his descendants vanishing with him.

Physical realities existing within the astral came in vastly differing sizes. At one end of the scale were sprawling universes that spanned hundreds of billions of galaxies, existing for so long that they were, by most practical measures, eternal. At the other end were small, astral proto-spaces, flickering into being only to disappear again just hours later.

Size was largely a good determinate of how long a physical reality would last. There was, however, a physical reality that was barely the size of a small sun, yet had been in existence longer than most universes. This reality was a single, flat plane. It had no sun and no stars, containing only one thing: the city world of Interstice.

Interstice was, as far as anyone with the power to check was aware, both the oldest and largest metropolis in existence. Oceans had interlinked, artificial islands with magical batteries charged by the great waves. Mountains were hollowed out, volcanos turned into foundry cities. Intelligent species of every stripe could be found, in jungles dotted with grand ziggurats, connected by magical skyways passing over the trees. Underwater cities connected by glass tunnels, with magical subways running not just on the floor but on the walls and ceilings of the tunnels as well.

There was no sun, yet there were days. No moon, yet there were tides. Climate affected not just weather but gravity. It was a realm of impossibilities that some called the capital city of the cosmos.

There were administrators in Interstice, but no rulers. When the great astral beings had business in a physical reality, this was the physical reality they used. In the face of that, who would be so bold as to claim to be anything but a caretaker? It was a place where the most powerful mortals in existence vied for the chance to be servants.

One of the many city-regions of Interstice was the island Glim. An artificial island, it defied the equatorial heat of its location to be made almost entirely of ice. The ground and buildings were all crafted from ice stained in rainbow colours, extending high above and deep below the surface of the water. The magical ice did not chill the bones and did not melt. The only cold it radiated was just enough to cool the tropical heat to a pleasant warmth.

Shako arrived via dimensional teleportation in the submarine bowels of the city, deep below the surface. He appeared in one of several portal squares that existed for the purpose. The local authorities noted arrivals and made various checks before allowing them into the city proper.

Portalling into just any region of Interstice was frowned upon and magically obstructed. Shako was powerful enough to circumvent such measures but had no reason to do so. He flew into the air toward a shaft in the ceiling, stopping at the checkpoint building affixed to the ceiling.

As he was a resident, a diamond-ranker and a favoured servant of the Builder, the civil authorities did little more than note Shako's arrival as he passed through the checkpoint. They delayed him no more than required to give a respectful welcome before he flew into the shaft and toward the surface. Emerging into open sky, Shako flew up and over the city. Glim's buildings of colourful, shimmering ice were a kaleidoscope under the clear blue sky.

At the very heart of Glim, as was the case with many city-regions, were the districts claimed by the great astral beings. The great astral beings could no more visit Interstice than they could any other physical reality, with their servants and agents being the ones to occupy the space. Each astral being that wanted one had their own territory, with the districts forming a ring around a shared communal district in the middle.

The Builder's district had the most varied and outlandish building designs as the Builder was not to be outdone on architecture. Shako had the finest residence in the Builder's district, making it one of the most impressive, if least subtle homes in the entirety of Interstice.

Shako did not head for home, instead heading for the border where the communal district met the Reaper's district. The Reaper's territory was marked by buildings whose ice was shaped and shaded like dark glass to look like towers of delicately-carved obsidian.

He alighted on the ground at the border of the Reaper's territory and went into a large, dark building. In the atrium, blue light shone through windows of ice, lighting up the dark, glassy walls. People moved out of his way as he moved to the man sitting behind a desk.

"Master Shako, sir," the man greeted.

"The Builder wishes to speak," Shako told him.

"The Reaper has anticipated this, Master Shako. Master Velius is waiting in the dome chamber."

Shako raised an eyebrow, but did not enquire further.

"Thank you," he said, and rose up into the air.

There were elevating platforms but Shako flew directly up and into a shaft in the high ceiling. There were magical barriers between each floor of the building but they vanished to admit Shako as he ascended all the way to the top. The shaft opened into a room that took up the entire top floor of the building, covering a dome of glassy ice. It was a pleasant lounge area with rich but understated décor. More used to the Builder's indulgent opulence than the Reaper's preference minimalism, Shako found it rather plain. A man got out of a chair to greet him, offering him a friendly smile and a hand to shake.

"Velius," Shako greeted warmly. "It's been too long."

"It has," Velius agreed. He was a tall celestine, with dark skin and a bushy mound of curly, silver hair that matched his eyes. "You've been back to your home, right? Are your family still ruling that world you're from?"

"For the moment," Shako said. "And I do mean moment. There's a horde at the gate situation."

"Ah. They took something you gave them and got carried away?" Velius asked.

"Exactly."

Velius nodded sympathetically as he waved Shako into a comfortable lounge chair before sitting back down himself.

"I had similar problems," he said. "It's almost a rite of passage for diamond-rankers. Did you decide to help them out or leave them to their fate?"

"They needed a lesson they were not going to get from me."

"Very wise," Velius said. "I made the mistake of getting my descendents out of trouble again and again. That just made them worse and worse every time, until I just had to wash

my hands of them entirely. I check on them every century or so, now, to see if any of them are still around. They were purged pretty thoroughly once I withdrew my protection.”

“I decided to protect the children,” Shako said. “Take them away, get a fresh start. Humble beginnings.”

“That’s a good idea,” Velius said. “You know, we should write a book. A guide to the newly diamond-rank. A lot of them have never even left their own worlds before. I was like that and could have really used the advice. We could get together with some of the others, make a list of all the things we did wrong.”

“Not a bad idea,” Shako said. “I know a couple of…”

He broke off mid-sentence.

“It’s time,” he said. Velius nodded and both their auras underwent a change as their respective great astral beings inhabited them.

“I know why you’ve come,” the Reaper said through Velius. The rich, warm tone of Velius’ voice became cold and bleak as it spoke the Reaper’s words. “The answer is no.”

“Asano is dead. He should stay dead.”

Shako’s voice was heavy but clipped as the Builder spoke through him.

“I agree,” the Reaper said, “but he carried the World-Phoenix’s token. Those pacts are older than you and I will not violate them for your childish indulgence.”

“I am not a child,” the Builder said.

“Are you not?” the Reaper asked. “You play around in mortal affairs like a child with toys. You have not been mortal for so very long, now. The rest of us grow tired of waiting for you to realise that and act with decorum appropriate to your station.”

“What is the point of being what we are if we allow ourselves to be bound by petty rules?”

“We are the rules,” the Reaper said. “To deny them is to deny ourselves.”

“We could be so much more,” the Builder said.

“More?” the Reaper asked. “You have built a world that you might play god, when being a god is so far beneath you.”

“Gods belong to one, meagre planet, which they share,” the Builder said. “I will be worshipped by an entire universe. I will be great astral being and god both, becoming more than either. A god beyond gods.”

“Good luck with that,” a female voice came drifting through the room, accompanied by the arrival of a potent presence. The World-Phoenix’s vessel was also a celestine, like the Reaper’s, but with alabaster skin and ruby hair. Her expression more alive than the blank

faces of the other vessel's, with a teasing smile and an amused twinkle in her red, gemstone eyes.

"World-Phoenix," the Builder said. "Why are you here?"

"I requested her attendance," the Reaper said. "I wish to settle things now before you make foolish decision that will force the hand of the rest of us."

"Your unbecoming obsession with mortal concerns is beneath us," the World-Phoenix said as she joined the others in sitting down.

"You are the one who gave Asano a token. He's your outworlder."

"I did not make Asano an outworlder," the World-Phoenix said. "That was happenstance. I simply gave him a gift as his soul passed through the astral."

"This is the correct way to intercede in mortal affairs," the Reaper told the Builder. "If you want a tree, plant a seed. Do not send an army to transplant it for you."

"How I conduct my affairs is my business," the Builder said.

"Yet you came here to ask the Reaper to interfere in mine," the World-Phoenix said.

"The dead are his concern," the Builder said. "What right have you to claim them?"

"And the integrity of dimensions is mine," the World-Phoenix said. "Remember that it is only with my permission that you can conduct your little game, and remember well the conditions I have placed upon it."

"I remember," the Builder said.

"Do you?" the World-Phoenix asked. "You have already pushed things to the limits of my tolerance. Gods are beings of singular planets, yet you gave one the means to interfere with not just another world, but another reality. I only stepped in because you have pushed conditions to the breaking point. Your divine accomplice has made a mistake that threatens to blow a giant hole in the side of a physical reality, taking an entire planet with it. That, in turn, could threaten the integrity of the reality as a whole. An entire universe, not even fourteen billion years old. I provide someone with an actual chance to rectify the situation and not only do you not thank me, but you come here and try to stop him?"

"You really think Asano can accomplish anything?" the Builder asked.

"He stopped you," the World-Phoenix said. "He's becoming a pleasantly effective little seedling."

"He didn't stop me. That was the ritualist."

"It was, wasn't it? The Celestial Book wanted me to remind you about proportionality, by the way. The ritualist is one of his, and one that he has high hopes for. He will not tolerate you sending some gold-ranker to kill the boy out of spite."

“I’m not so petty as that,” the Builder said and the World-Phoenix laughed. Even the impassive face of the Reaper was tinged with scepticism.

“You are literally here because you want revenge against one mortal,” the World-Phoenix said. “You were not raised up from mortality yourself in order to reign over those you left behind. You need to turn your attention to the higher concerns for which you were brought up to attend.”

“I was not raised up,” the Builder said. “I took this power for myself.”

The World-Phoenix and the Reaper shared a glance.

“Of course you were,” the World-Phoenix said.

“I asked the World-Phoenix here to discuss a compromise,” the Reaper said.

“Why bother?” the World-Phoenix asked. “We both know that he won’t learn until he crosses a line and faces the consequences.”

“I think we can all agree it would be better if it did not come to that,” the Reaper said. “I have terms that may not please either of you, but should, at least, be tolerable.”

“Speak your terms, then,” the Builder said.

“Builder,” the Reaper said, “you will be forbidden from interference of any kind with Asano’s birth world. You will send no people, recruit no followers and produce neither star seeds nor tokens.”

“That is no concession,” the World-Phoenix said. “Asano’s world is unstable enough. He already knows that if he intervenes further I will intervene far more directly.”

“A price, at this point, he might be willing to pay,” the Reaper said. “This will be a formal pact, with all the consequences of breaking it that would entail. Further, his intercession in the other world will be curtailed.”

“I already have plans in motion,” the Builder said. “You have no right to interfere.”

“And you shall not be restricted from carrying them out,” the Reaper said. “But no new star seeds, no new tokens, and no more vessels. You will withdraw from your existing vessels and unmake all the unused seeds and tokens. That means the world itself, along with any attached astral spaces.”

“That’s barely a concession either,” the World-Phoenix said. “He has already made star seeds fall onto that world like rain drops. His invasion will not need more of them.”

“What do I get for these concessions?” the Builder asked.

“The World-Phoenix will offer Asano a power. It will aid him in the task ahead, but at a cost: No more resurrections. No force shall return him from the dead again. Not his soul entering a physical reality as an outworlder or any other force. When he dies, he dies.”

“If he reaches the upper ranks,” the World-Phoenix said, “that would leave him vulnerable compared to other essence users who could be brought back with gold and diamond-ranked essence magic. The power I offered in return would have to be formidable to be worth the trade. It would also be incumbent upon him to accept it. Even we cannot reshape a soul without permission.”

“It can be powerful, but only in such that it is a tool for completing the task that lays before him,” the Reaper said.

“It’s not enough,” the World-Phoenix said. “You wish me to trim my own tree and credit the Builder for trimming he has already finished?”

“I will make a concession as well,” the Reaper said.

“Why?” the World-Phoenix asked. “What concern is any of this to you?”

“Asano has died twice already. It concerns me that you would find a way to bring him back again and again until you are done with him. If you make him an outworlder countless times over, you make a farce of my role.”

“I’m not the Builder,” the World-Phoenix said. “I do not play callous games with the rules.”

“I also have some gratitude to Asano,” the Reaper said. “He and his companions gave final release to a number of souls that had been trapped. Many of them were my people. I am not opposed to helping him face the challenges ahead.”

“Favouritism,” the Builder said. “Asano has one of your shadows chasing him around.”

The Reaper gave a brief, fatherly smile.

“Of all my children, Shade has ever followed his own path.”

“What is this concession you’ll make?” the World-Phoenix asked the Reaper.

“Asano is going to need a companion he can trust for the tasks ahead. Where he is going there will be those that have his trust and those that have the knowledge and power to help him. There will not be anyone with both of things, but I can provide such a person.”

The World-Phoenix narrowed her eyes. “You’re talking about another outworlder.”

“Yes.”

“How is that acceptable?” the Builder asked. “I came here asking you to leave a soul where it belongs, and not only do you refuse me, but offer to take another one out?”

“Yes,” the Reaper said.

“Why would I agree to any of this?” the Builder asked.

“Because the next time you kill Asano,” the Reaper said, “he will stay dead.”

“Still not enough,” the World-Phoenix said. “This outworlder. I’ll agree if we bestow blessings to evolve her racial gifts. All her racial gifts.”

“Each of us can only advance one power,” the Reaper said.

“Which the three of us will,” the World-Phoenix said. “We also convince three more to do the same.”

“That’s outrageous,” the Builder said. “Why would I participate in this?”

“To demonstrate to the others that you are anything more than a selfish child in dire need of being admonished,” the Reaper said. “Do not forget how your position amongst our number became available.”

The Builder looked at the Reaper for a long time before speaking.

“Very well,” the Builder said finally. “I agree to the terms.”

“As do I,” the World-Phoenix said. “I will remind you again, Builder, that Asano’s world is already off-limits to you.”

“I know.”

“See that you remember,” the Reaper said. “If you violate the World-Phoenix’s conditions, you will be censured.”

“I said that I know.”

“You are known for saying one thing and doing another,” the Reaper said. “It’s very mortal of you.”

Chapter 261

Recruitment

Both the seal and the rank-restriction on the astral space aperture had been removed by Jason's team. Clive had turned the world engineers that were meant to invade their world into magical batteries that opened a passageway back to it. This not only allowed the team to escape, but opened the astral space up to thorough exploration.

The first step was securing a foothold in a zone still steeped in danger by the rapid-spawning monsters, so Emir and his people moved in to secure what had formerly been the cultist camp. A number of Greenstone's local silver-rankers volunteering to assist. Aside from the potential wealth to be found, if they could forge a relationship with Emir, opportunities may well open up for the younger members of their families.

What they discovered was a truth that Emir, as a professional treasure hunter, already knew well: Exploring the unknown came with unknown danger. While Emir's people were making preparations and learning everything they could from Clive, Humphrey and the rest of their team, two local silver-rankers were left to watch the portal, along with a number of Emir's support staff. They were all found dead.

The deaths caused a furore in Greenstone's adventuring community. Aside from those who spent most of their time away from the city, like Thalia Mercer and Danielle Geller, the local silver-rankers were a risk-averse lot. Most were older, having slowly worked their way through bronze using monster cores.

Arabelle Remore led the investigation, and quickly reaching an unpleasant conclusion. She had seen the work of an energy vampire in the past and speaking with Jason's team quickly identified its most likely source. The Builder's last vessel, Thadwick Mercer, had never been found. Humphrey led her to the location in which they had left the soul imprisoning the sword, to discover that both were gone.

It was clear that the Builder had cut its losses, leaving the abandoned vessel to consume the loose soul and transforming into a potent threat. It had managed to approach the portal in secret and escape the astral space, stopping to feed on the other side. To help hunt the creature, Arabelle called her team mate Cal back to Greenstone.

"Have you ever tracked an energy vampire before?" Emir asked him, after Cal was briefed on their situation.

"I have," Cal said. "They can come into being a few different ways, with varying results. When they started out as a ghoul, they frequently wind up deficient, intellectually.

They remain creatures of hunger and instinct. If that's the case, it won't be hard to track. Bodies will start dropping fast, so we should check the villages around the lake."

"And if it is smart?"

"Then finding it will be rough. It'll know that we're after it, so it will most likely look to avoid causing trouble and get out of the region entirely. Fortunately, Greenstone is an isolated region with limited means of departure. We can investigate them while keeping an eye out for deaths. Even if it's laying low, an energy vampire still needs to feed."

The Mercer family compound was composed of five equidistant towers, interconnected by walkways. From the air above, the compound looked something akin to a magical circle. Thalia Mercer stood atop one of the towers, leaning on the stone balustrade as she looked out over the city.

The fortunes of her family had not been great in recent times. The defection of Thadwick had been crippling in numerous ways. The family's reputation had been savaged and Thadwick's insight into the Mercer family operations had led to a series of costly raids on their interests by the Builder cult. If not for their connection to the Duke and taking the lead in the purge of the cult from the city, the results could have been catastrophic. Even so, it would likely be generations before the family fully recovered.

For Thalia herself, the worst part was the realisation of just how badly she had failed her son. She had taken Cassandra to teach her the ways of an adventurer, while her husband had groomed their son to take over the family's local interests. She had known he was a spoiled boy, but only discovered the degree to which her neglect had harmed him when it was too late.

Her husband's shortcomings were not a mystery to her. There was a reason his younger brother had been named heir to the Dukedom, while Beaufort had been married off for political gain. She should never have had let him have full control over their son's upbringing, but it had allowed her to take their daughter to see a larger world.

Her neglect had allowed her husband to impress upon Thadwick his importance, without ever tempering it with responsibility. Now she wondered if there was any of her son left. First, she had been told of his fate as vessel for the Builder. Now he was some kind of vampiric monster.

"Do you even still exist, my little boy?" she whispered to herself.

"He does not," a voice behind her said and she whirled around.

She hadn't sensed the presence behind her and still couldn't, even looking right at him. Her aura and magic senses told her there was nothing there, but her eyes saw the

face of her son. He looked strong and healthy but she looked into his eyes and did not see Thadwick behind them.

“You’re not my son,” she said.

“No,” the energy vampire said.

“Then who are you?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Your son was the soil from which I grew. I know the things he knew, but those memories are not mine. I remember his thoughts, yet they make no sense. The things he did are not things I would do. The things he said are not things I would say.”

“What does that even mean?” Thalia asked.

“Your son is gone,” the vampire said. “I am what’s left.”

“They told me that you’re a monster,” she said. “Did you come to kill me?”

“No,” the vampire said, “although I have killed. I’m trying to understand who I am. What I am. Your son’s memories are the only guide I have, but I cannot understand the feelings and events that I remember. Your son hurt the things he loved. Turned against the family that gave him everything. Abandoned the friends who worked so hard to help and protect him.”

Tears crawled down Thalia’s face. Despite wearing her son’s face, this thing looked nothing like him.

“I failed him,” she said. “I should have helped him. Guided him.”

“Will you help me?” the vampire asked. It sounded so vulnerable, like a lost child.

“No,” she said, steeling herself. She squared her shoulders and wiped the tears from her face on the back of her arm. “The only thing left that I can do for my son is to destroy the thing that he has become.”

Thalia erupted forward in a blur, only to be stopped short, her fist caught in the vampire’s hand. He casually flung her from the tower rooftop to plunge toward the ground below. He knew that it would not harm her.

“I’m sorry mother,” it whispered.

The former cultist camp in the astral space had been left in shambles by the battle that had taken place. The blood of cultists and the converted stained the ground, their dead bodies scattered amongst the broken remains of constructs. The monster blood that had drenched the place had all evaporated into rainbow smoke. Buildings made with stone-shaping powers had been broken and shattered, crates of supplies left ruined and spoiled.

After the death of the silver-rankers, the Adventure Society stepped in, taking over from Emir's people and heavily securing both sides of the portal arch. Emir wasn't boxed out, still free to explore the astral space, but the Adventure Society's action helped stabilise things after the loss of the silver-rankers. Ever since the disastrous expedition into the desert astral space, the families of Greenstone had been very wary of losses.

After being cleared out, the cultist camp had been repurposed as a base of operations for a thorough exploration of the astral space. The lowest floors of the tower had space for occupation and Clive was sitting in a room he had claimed, books splayed out on tables as he moved from one to the other, scribbling notes in a book.

Clive was kept busy organising the materials being salvaged that had belonged to the Builder's ritualists. All the supplies, books, notes and tools that were found were piled up around him. The camp around the tower had been largely trashed, but the original walled fortress where the cultists first arrived was more intact. A lot of the ritualists' paraphernalia discovered there remained undamaged and Clive was working to try and better understand the magic the Builder cult used.

If he could better understand the process of turning someone into a vessel, he might be able to find useful information for hunting the energy vampire. The books Knowledge gave to Jason, along with all the notes Clive had taken on them, would have been excellent supplemental material, but they were lost along with Jason.

More important to Clive than the vampire was something he was desperately looking for in the cultist material but found not so much as a clue to. Engrossed in his work, he didn't notice a beautiful young woman in the robes of a Knowledge priestess appeared at the open door.

"You won't find it," Gabrielle told Clive, who looked up at the intrusion.

"Acolyte Pellin," he said. His hair was unruly, his face covered in stubble. There were thick bags under his eyes.

"You need to sleep, Mr Standish."

Clive narrowed his eyes at the priestess.

"You said I wouldn't find it."

"Yes."

"Then you know what I'm looking for."

"Yes."

"Then tell me."

"I can tell you a part," she said, offering a sad smile that mixed sympathy and apology. "There is only so much my Lady will allow me to say."

“Then say it,” Clive said, too tired for niceties. “What was that heat coming out of Jason? Did the Builder do something to his soul?”

“My Lady does not wish to tell you what that fire is. She will allow me to say that it was not the Builder’s doing. Jason Asano’s soul was vouchsafed upon his death and sent on its way. The Builder cannot touch it.”

“Your goddess is certain? We inquired with the goddess of Death and she didn’t know. This place does not fall under the eyes of our gods.”

“My goddess is certain,” Gabrielle said. “Asano’s soul is exactly where it is meant to be.”

Clive deflated like a balloon, letting out a long, slow breath. He said nothing for a long time as Gabrielle waited patiently.

“Thank you,” he said finally. “And thank your goddess. It’s been playing on all of our minds.”

“Normally she would not speak on it,” Gabrielle said. “The fate of the dead is not the business of the living. Under the circumstances, she felt it was best to alleviate your concerns.”

Clive pushed himself wearily up from the wooden stool he was sitting on and onto his feet.

“I need to go tell the others,” he said.

“I have something for you first,” Gabrielle said. “You have fought the Builder and you will again.”

“You’re damn right.”

Gabrielle slid a satchel off of her should and rested it on the desk.

“This dimensional bag has copies of all the books my Lady gave to Jason and all the notes you took while studying them. She wants you to have them, for the fights to come.”

Clive looked at the satchel, then picked it up and slung it over his own shoulder.

“Thank you,” she said, “and thank your goddess for me.”

He hurried past her and out of the room.

Gabrielle exited the astral space through the portal arch, arriving back in her own world. Since the deaths at the hands of the energy vampire, the security around the portal arch was much tighter. Anti-portal barriers had been set up, inhibiting teleportation into or out of the underwater dome. Visitors were required to physically return to the lake surface before they could teleport away or travel overland back to the city.

Gabrielle stepped onto one of the bubble platforms that had been set up to deliver people to and from the surface. It moved out of the dome, maintaining a bubble of air as it ascended through the water.

"It's done," she said.

"I know," Knowledge's comforting voice spoke directly into her mind. "You've done well, but you are uncertain that this is the right approach."

"Why not tell them?"

"Because this is not a time for comfort," Knowledge said. "This is a time for war. Asano's death will drive his friends to be more dedicated weapons against the Builder."

"I think they would have been motivated even without wanting to avenge him."

"But now they are not just motivated. They are zealous. In any case, Asano may never return."

"But you think he will," Gabrielle said.

"Yes."

"If he does, I don't think he'll be happy that you let his friends think he was still dead."

"If he returns, he will have greater concerns than that. His friends are more effective weapons believing he is dead and gone. It is objectively better for them to think that."

"I can't help wondering if this is one of the times that people aren't going to react the way you think they will," Gabrielle said reluctantly. "I don't think objective results are what Asano is going to value."

Humphrey and Sophie rose up through Emir's cloud palace on the elevating platform, arriving in his private study. It was on top of one of the palace towers, under a shimmering dome of translucent mist. The floor was riddled with water pools, from which lush green plants were growing. There were more than the last time Humphrey visited the space, which had become more of a rooftop garden than a study.

Emir was behind a desk, glancing up from the papers he was reading to wave in front of him. A pair of cloud chairs rose up from the floor. Humphrey and Sophie moved over and sat down as Emir put his papers into a folder, then looked up with a smile.

"How are you both doing?" he asked gently.

"Jason's memorial is done," Humphrey said. "We're ready to take the fight back to the Builder."

"Right back," Sophie agreed. "We're ready to taste cultist blood."

“Easier said than done,” Emir said. “The Adventure Society is confident, now, that the cult activity in this region is finished. They put everything they had into claiming the last astral space. The church of Purity as well.”

“We don’t mind travelling to find them,” Humphrey said.

“It hasn’t reached the point of open fighting,” Emir said. “The cult is still being clandestine in their activities, sneaking into astral spaces. Only when we catch them at it does it turn to fighting, but at least we’re more prepared than the expedition here.”

“Maybe we should go after the church of Purity,” Sophie said.

“The church of Purity maintain that only a rogue faction are responsible for collaboration, and that they are rooting them out themselves.”

“That’s crap,” Sophie said.

“I agree, and we’re not alone,” Emir said. “It’s a delicate issue, though. For the moment, it’s best to let the other churches pressure and investigate them.”

“You have something you want us to do,” Humphrey said. “We’re not looking to be kept busy. We want to make a difference.”

“What I have in mind isn’t busywork,” Emir said. “The world still has problems that won’t stop and wait for us to handle the Builder.”

“What do you have in mind?” Humphrey asked.

“Things carried on during your time in the astral space. The monster surge still hasn’t happened. We’ve been getting precursor signs for most of a year, now, but it still hasn’t happened.”

“So I’ve heard,” Humphrey said. “A number of my family’s bronze-rankers have crossed into silver from fighting the regular stream of silver-rank monsters.”

“There have been other developments as well,” Emir said. “Did Jason ever tell you about what he learned when he claimed the Reaper’s scythe?”

“All he told me,” Humphrey said, “was that there was some kind of club and the first rule was not talking about it. I’m pretty sure he was doing that thing where... well, you know the thing.”

Emir and Sophie both nodded.

“What he learned,” Emir said, “and the thing he was told not to tell, was that the Order of the Reaper were not, as previously believed, wiped out.”

“That’s not much of a revelation,” Humphrey said. “I think everyone suspected that.”

“But only those who became certain of it were granted access to the final room of the test to have their thoughts confirmed. They each received various prizes that came with the confirmation – the scythe, in Jason’s case – and an admonition to tell no one.”

“That’s stupid,” Sophie said. “Why bother to confirm it, then turn around and tell them to keep their mouths shut? There’s no way that doesn’t leak.”

“But what if that was the point?” Emir asked. “One of the few who made it to that last room died and had her entire contingent wiped out along with her. It happened right in the middle of the lakeside camp, without anyone around them noticing. Later investigation discovered that she the one who leaked the secret.”

“If the secret was already out there, why kill them?” Humphrey asked. “That just brings more attention to it.”

“Again,” Emir said. “What if that is the point? In the time you’ve been away, there have been signs cropping up all over the world that the Order of Reaper is ready to reclaim their position in the shadows. The events here seem to be part of a much larger campaign to make the order’s return an open secret.”

“Does that mean that the person who hired you to open up the astral space is a part of the Order?” Sophie asked.

“That was my suspicion as well,” Emir said. “I have since been convinced otherwise. My client, it seems, was used as a tool by the Order. Any guesses on how a diamond-ranker feels about being someone else’s tool?”

“Ready to kill some people?” Sophie asked.

“Ready to kill some people,” Emir confirmed. “I’m washing my hands of the astral space as the Adventure Society moves in to explore it. They’ve brought in more high-rankers, given the locals are of limited value. My client has asked me to continue my investigation of the Order of the Reaper, and I would like your team to help me.”

“Not interested,” Sophie said. “If some old order of assassins wants to run around playing politics, I’m happy to let them. It’s the Builder that I want.”

“All their known areas of operation have a higher level of magic than here,” Emir warned. “That means higher-ranked adventurers, which means that if you go there, you’ll be told to shut up and do what you’re told. Given that Jason Asano had such a large hand in your training, I don’t imagine those are skills you picked up.”

“So I should just give it up?” Sophie asked combatively.

“No,” Emir said. “I suggest you take a longer view. I doubt the Order of the Reaper is choosing now to make their appearance by accident. It seems likely that they are going to try and leverage action against the Builder to re-establish themselves in the eyes of the world’s various authorities.”

“You’re saying that if we go after the Reaper’s order, we’re likely to stumble into the Builder’s cult,” Humphrey said.

“Honestly, that is just postulation on my part,” Emir said. “I think the chances are good, though.”

“Why us?” Humphrey asked. “Aside from the personal connection, what do we have to offer you, when you have no shortage of silver-rankers, let alone bronze.”

“To be frank, I don’t need you, Humphrey,” Emir said, then turned to look directly at Sophie. “I need you, Sophie. Most of what we’ve managed to learn about the Order of the Reaper, we’re fairly certain that the Order itself has put in our path. You, Sophie, are the strongest lead we have on the contemporary activities of the Order of the Reaper that I’m fairly confident didn’t come from the order itself.”

“You’re talking about the fighting style my father taught me,” Sophie said.

“Yes,” Emir said. “I want to explore your past and see what we find.”

“I’d rather just go right after the Builder,” she said. “The Builder is going to pay for Jason.”

“I understand your feelings,” Emir said. “As I said, there are only so many opportunities to go after the Builder directly. Even if you do agree to help me, I think you’ll get your chance anyway, courtesy of Clive.”

In the astral space tower, Clive was at work combining what had been left by the cultists with what Gabrielle had delivered.

“Mr Standish?”

Clive turned to see a man and a woman in the doorway. They were wearing Magic Society robes and both radiated silver-rank auras.

“You’ve come for the cultists’ material?” Clive asked.

“We have,” the woman said. “We’ve also come for you.”

“For me?” Clive asked. “I’m not a Magic Society official anymore. I’m just a regular member; I’ve gone full-time adventurer.”

“We are aware,” the woman said. “Let me introduce myself. My name is Lorelei Grantham and I’m a researcher assigned to work with the Adventure Society’s Continental Council. As we’ve been collating information about the Builder cult’s activities, we realised that a small, provincial city was making discoveries about the cult just as quickly as the major centres. When we looked into it, we discovered that you were crucial in many of these discoveries, but had already entered this astral space to take the fight to the Builder.”

“I’m an adventurer,” Clive said. “We fight the bad guys.”

“That’s an odd turn of phrase,” the man said.

“I had a friend who was prone to odd turns of phrase,” Clive said. “He died stopping the Builder from using this astral space as a weapon.”

Clive gestured at the materials stacked up around him.

“I’m still putting it together,” he said, “but I’m certain that if the Builder’s world engineers had been activated and used to invade, the destructiveness of their arrival would have dwarfed the results of simply claiming an astral space. The destruction may well have reached Greenstone, which is hundreds of kilometres away.”

“Do you know how long the portal will remain stable?” Lorelei asked.

“The portals around the edge of the city didn’t activate,” Clive said. “I thought they would, but I was very much improvising, so I was bound to get things wrong. The portal arch we transplanted to this tower will probably hold up for another few weeks before becoming unstable and collapsing. I think the Adventure Society intends to use it as a place to help people rank-up until then.”

“That’s my understanding, yes,” Lorelei said. “Mr Standish, I’ve been looking at your record with the Magic Society. You’ve been wasted here. I’d like you to come work for me at the Continental Council. If you want to avenge your friend, that will put you at the forefront of resisting the Builder’s efforts.”

“I have a team,” Clive said. “I’m not going to leave them to go off and do research.”

“We anticipate that there will be a goodly amount of fieldwork involved,” Lorelei said. “That is one of many reasons that make you so appealing. Your skill set and your team will be ideally suited to acting against the cult directly, as needed. Mr Emir Bahadir has a use for your team, but we have made arrangements to portal them in should you have a need to go into the field.”

“Is it true that you use combat rituals?” the man asked.

“Dennis,” Lorelei scolded.

“It’s really rare,” Dennis said.

Clive’s left hand flashed, drawing out a simple diagram in the air. He drew the wand strapped to his hip and jammed it into the diagram, which lit up brightly as it affixed itself to the tip. Clive fired the wand at the pair, which showered them in harmless, rainbow sparks. The whole process happened in the time it took to draw a breath.

“Yes,” Clive said. “I use combat rituals.”

Chapter 262

Ducking Responsibility

Arabelle and Emir were talking as they made their way through the cloud palace.

“Are you sure about this?” Emir asked. “I like Sophie, but she’s a damaged girl, in more ways than one. I’m not sure that she’s in a state right now where I want to entrust my granddaughter to her.”

“This is a good match,” Arabelle said. “Sophie lived a life where she couldn’t trust anyone but Belinda. A complete stranger came along and transformed her life, only to be snatched away as she was coming to terms with that. What she needs now is a place to channel everything that isn’t self destructive. Being responsible for someone else, the way Jason took responsibility to her, is exactly what she needs.”

“That’s fine, but what about the things my granddaughter needs?”

“Ketis is at a tricky stage, right now,” Arabelle said. “She got her essences so young, so she’s been waiting longer than most to get out into the world. She’s full of rebellious ideas.”

“That much I know,” Emir said, a long-suffering expression on his face.

“Sophie isn’t like the authority figures your granddaughter knows. Ketis is used to pushing around people who won’t stand their ground for the simple reason that she’s your granddaughter. They know how soft you are with her and are afraid to be harder. Sophie is not. She’ll provide the boundaries and life experience that Ketis needs right now.”

They entered one of the lounges to find Sophie drinking Emir’s expensive alcohol straight from the bottle.

“She’s also the kind of person a rebellious young girl can look up to,” Arabelle said.

Sophie nodded a greeting without putting down the bottle from which she continued to quaff. She finally lowered the half empty bottle, replacing the stopper as she looked over the bar.

“Where did this one come from again?” she muttered to herself.

“You can go ahead and take it,” Emir said.

“Nice,” Sophie said, slipping it into the dimensional pouch on her hip. “So what did you want to see me for?”

“Well, as you know better than most,” Arabelle said, “the experiences we have at iron-rank are important in shaping the adventurers we become.”

“Is that why you turned out the way you are?” Sophie asked Emir. “You said something about a giant metal duck, right?”

"You told her that was at iron-rank?" Arabelle asked Emir.

"Probably," Emir said. "It was probably what she needed to hear at the time."

"You should never take what Emir tells you at face value," Arabelle warned Sophie.

"I know the type," Sophie answered with a sad smile. "So he wasn't iron-rank?"

"No," Arabelle said. "In fact, it was the very last job our team did together."

Emir crawled out of the mud hole, Gabriel and Arabelle crawling out after him. They found Cal waiting for them, as neat and clean as they were filthy.

"How do you always do that?" Emir asked.

"That's nothing," Cal said. "I've been in the real mud."

"What does that even mean?" Emir complained.

"There's little point in explaining," Cal said. "You're giving up the adventuring life."

"There's brown sludge packed into my underwear like I ate a bunch of clay and then soiled myself," Emir complained. "I'm gold rank; I haven't used a toilet in thirty years. If this is the adventuring life, I'll be glad to see the back of it."

The team made its way back to the cloud house, where the three mud-caked adventurers spent an hour in the shower. They vociferously expressed their gratitude at finding an array of food waiting, courtesy of Cal.

"So, how's it going, collecting the materials to upgrade the cloud flask?" Gabriel asked.

"The last of them should be waiting for me when we get back to Vitesse," Emir said. "Once I can turn this place into a nice big ship, then my storied career as a professional treasure hunter will begin."

"I can't believe anyone would hire you to find anything," Cal said. "Unless it's hidden in a brothel."

"You didn't hear, Cal?" Arabelle said. "Our sweet boy, Emir, has mended his sexually adventurous ways."

"I don't believe it," Cal said.

"This is what you miss when you pick up extra contracts instead of taking a break with the rest of us," Gabriel said.

"You don't get to diamond rank by taking breaks," Cal said.

"That's true enough," Arabelle said. "He really does seem to have come around though. He's met someone."

"Man, woman or fish?" Cal asked.

"Merfolk are not fish," Emir said. "They happen to be very sensual people."

“Very sensual fish people,” Cal muttered.

“It’s a capable young bronze-rank girl,” Arabelle said. “I quite like her.”

“Bronze rank?” Cal muttered. “Cradle snatching.”

“In all seriousness, you be careful,” Gabriel told Emir. “Cal’s not wrong that she’s young. Between the rank difference and the fact that she’s going to be working for you, there’s a lot of ways you could take advantage. Don’t let me hear that you did.”

“What kind of sleaze to you take me for?” Emir asked, only to met by three flat expression. “Oh, nice.”

“If you like this girl, be patient,” Arabelle said. “She’s not a match for you, right now. If she’s working for you, she’s not going anywhere. Give her time to come into her own.”

“How much time? I don’t want to be going around a decade from now, still mooning over her.”

“She’ll definitely have someone else by then,” Cal goaded.

“That’s fine,” Emir said. “Highly suspicious accidents happen every day.”

“No,” Arabelle scolded. “Bad Emir.”

“I’m not a naughty puppy,” Emir said.

“You kind of are, though,” Gabriel said, the other two nodding their agreement.

“See, this is why I’m retiring,” Emir said. “If all the people I’m working with are getting paid by me, they have to show me some respect.”

He looked to Gabriel and Arabelle.

“I know Cal won’t stop taking contracts, but what about you two? Will you callously replace me and get right back to adventuring?”

“Rufus is old enough to start training properly, now,” Arabelle said. “We’re going to step away from contracts for a while and be home for the next monster surge. We’ll be taking a more hand-on approach instead of just leaving everything to the academy.”

“I wouldn’t go expecting him to get his essences too soon,” Gabriel warned. “All the boys in my family are later bloomers.”

The team returned to the village the mud monster had been threatening, only to find it disturbingly devoid of people. In their place, they found piles of mud throughout the village, which had the clothes of the villagers inside them.

“What in the world happened?” Gabriel asked, crouched next to a pile of mud in the mayor’s house. He fished out a necklace he remembered seeing around the mayor’s neck. “Did they all turn into mud?”

Cal turned, looking through the wall.

"There's someone here. He's skilled; I can barely sense his aura."

The team went out onto the street. The man there was wearing sandy coloured leathers with numerous tribal markings sewed in. They were designed to blend in with the tattoos on his skin. He was an elf with stark white hair, reddish skin and golden eyes.

"Greetings," the elf said. "Did you kill the mud lord that was inhabiting this region?"

"If you mean the awful mud monster in a hole in the woods, then yes," Emir said.

"I have been pursuing its progenitor," the man said. "An emperor ooze."

"Are you from the Walsh tribe?" Cal asked.

"You recognise our markings," the elf said. "I am Brian, son of Kevin."

"As in, Kevin, son of Jeremy, son of Dennis?" Cal asked.

"That is my father, yes," Brian said.

"You come from a strong line," Cal praised.

"I am proud to trace my lineage all the way back to Jeff, Lord of the Hunt," Brian said.

The team introduced themselves.

"I have heard the Remore name," Brian said. "It is said that you raise fine warriors."

"Do you know what happened to the villagers here?" Arabelle asked.

"There were never villagers here," the man said. "They were homunculi of the mud lord."

"Then why would they send for the Adventure Society to come kill it?" Gabriel asked.

"Only the truly capable can defeat a mud lord in their lair," Brian said. "They like to call the strong to fight them, then consume them to grow stronger. It seems that you were more than it could handle, however. You have my respect."

"I'd rather have your soap," Emir said. "You don't have any crystal wash, do you?"

"Again with this?" Gabriel asked.

"It was your job to stock up the potions," Emir said. "I very specifically reminded you that we were low on crystal wash."

"You have a magical cloud house with crystal wash in the shower water!"

"Diluted crystal wash. It isn't the same."

Arabelle gave Brian an apologetic smile while Cal ran a frustrated hand over his face.

"So this isn't a real village?" Arabelle asked.

"I told you it was weird that all the buildings were new," Cal said.

"I intended to recruit aid before challenging the emperor ooze that produced the mud lord you fought. You have proven yourself capable and I would be honoured if you would join me in my quest."

"Actually, we were just about to head back to... ow!"

Emir was cut off by Cal stamping on his foot.

“Are there magic spikes on the bottom of your boots?” Emir asked.

“The honour would be ours,” Cal said to Brian, ignoring Emir. “To fight alongside a warrior of the Walsh tribe is a privilege.”

“We’d be happy to help,” Arabelle agreed.

As Gabriel’s attacks threatened the ooze emperor’s core, the ooze minions melted back into puddle shapes and rapidly flowed in the core’s direction. They formed a thin, gelatinous barrier around it that reformed with every attack.

“Get ready,” Brian called out. “I’ll expose the core to let you finish it off!”

No longer attacked after the sudden retreat of the oozings, Brian took the opportunity to pour powdered iron onto the ground in a circle. He quickly finished the summoning and an enormous iron duck rose from the circle, earning a sceptical eyebrow raise from Emir.

“That thing looks ridiculo...”

The iron duck let out a sound that was a quack by way of an earthquake, the air shimmering as noise blasted out in a tsunami of force. The continuous barrage of sound struck like a fire hose streaming full bore into a jelly dessert, splattering ooze everywhere. As the cacophonous blast finally subsided, a V-formation of iron mallards swooped into the hole that had been burrowed in the ooze emperor’s protective sheath. They each let out smaller sonic attacks of their own before exploding into metal fragments, the accumulated damage once more revealing the ooze emperor’s core.

Gabriel and Emir didn’t waste any time, dashing forward into the hole in the monster that was already starting to close. They destroyed the core and the ooze lost all cohesion, rapidly liquefying. Inundated in the dissolution of the ooze, Gabriel and Emir were washed up at the feet of their companions like bedraggled sailors from a shipwreck. Emir got to his feet, looking at himself with disgust as he shook his arms to fling off goo.

“Tell me again about how it doesn’t matter than you forgot to get more crystal wash?” he asked loudly, ears still ringing from the thunderous quack.

Gabriel tried to get to his feet, slipped on ooze and fell over again.

“I think I may have to acknowledge the point,” he conceded laying in the stinking residue.

Brian ignored the mess to wade in and help Gabriel to his feet.

“You are a credit to your name,” Brian said. “You fight well.”

“Thanks,” Gabriel said. “You too.”

“Okay, this time I’m *really* done with having adventures,” Emir said.

“You are giving up the path of the warrior?” Brian asked.

“Damn right,” Emir said. “I’m going to be a treasure hunter. Professionally. For money. Plus treasure.”

“Uncovering hidden secrets, unravelling ancient mysteries and exploring unseen horizons,” Brian said. “An admirable way to spend a life.”

“Nice,” Emir said, pleasantly surprised. “This lot think I’m a quitter.”

“Warriors claim the glory,” Brian said, “but who builds the homes they live in? Sing the songs of their deeds? Each of us must find their own path and contribute in our own way.”

“You know, I like you, Brian,” Emir said. “Have you ever considered treasure hunting in a subordinate capacity?”

Rufus led Ketis into the lounge as Emir was wrapping up his story.

“Emir was just telling Sophie about how she met Brian,” Arabelle told her son. Whose face took on a grimacing smile. “He told her they met while he was iron-rank, but you were iron-rank when you met Brain’s son, right?”

“Yes,” Rufus said flatly. “Yes, I was.”

“Why don’t you tell us about it?” Arabelle asked sweetly.

“Mother...”

“Son...”

Rufus sighed.

Although Roland Remore was rarely spotted on the Remore Academy campus, the presence of the diamond-rank arch-chancellor was always felt. When he did make an appearance, it drew all eyes. Whenever he acted personally, the ramifications were much discussed.

Most recently, he was rumoured to have personally brought in some boy from the remote countryside to join the academy. Roland Remore looked like a well-preserved forty, a tenth of the reality. He was tall, strong and handsome, with a round bush of dark, curly hair and a neatly trimmed goatee. Walking behind him was a boy of fifteen, wearing plain leather hide and sandals.

Rufus Remore was the prince of Remore Academy, the talented heir apparent to the power and prestige of his family legacy. He was lounging in the duelling courtyard with his friends, watching the friendly matches. He didn’t bother to participate as there was no one there who posed a challenge. He wasn’t going to go punching down.

Everything stopped the moment the arch-chancellor appeared, no one paying attention to the boy moving in his wake. Rufus immediately leap to his feet, rushing to respectfully greet his grandfather, although he would not address him as such on campus.

“Arch-chancellor,” Rufus greeted, bowing his head.

“Just who I was looking for,” Roland said. “Rufus, I’ve brought in young man to join the academy.”

Rufus looked at the boy for the first time. He was a white-haired elf, packing more muscle than most of his race. He could sense the boy’s aura, in the early stages of iron-rank but well controlled. Rufus felt a familiar pang of jealousy at the boy’s youth, having had to wait until he was nineteen before his body was ready to accept essences.

“I thought,” Roland continued, “that there would be no better way to introduce him than a friendly spar with our finest student.”

A susurrus went through the crowd of students looking on. The arch-chancellor personally bringing a stranger to fight Rufus Remore was the kind of event everyone not present would be sore over missing.

Soon, illusionary doubles of Rufus and the boy were in one of the courtyard’s arenas, their bodies inert on nearby on projecting platforms.

“I exhort you all to watch closely,” Roland announced to the gathered students, as if there was even a single one whose eyes were not glued to the spectacle. “I believe that this will be an important lesson for all.

“I am Rufus Remore,” Rufus said formally as he conjured a golden sword.

“I am Kenneth, son of Brian,” the boy said, calling out his summoned familiar. It was a duck.

Chapter 263

Show and Tell

DS Adam Cosgrove was thirty one years old and looked like a detective from a TV show. He wasn't good looking enough for it to be an American show, but he had a dishevelled intelligence that was compelling enough for a middlingly successful British or Australian crime drama.

He was in the middle of an apartment building, standing next to a uniformed officer. An older woman, she had the air of having seen it all. Being a police officer, all in her case meant all the horrible things people do to one another.

"Have you ever seen anything like this?" Adam asked.

"Nope. I've seen some weird business, but this is a new one on me."

The apartment building was ordinarily an unremarkable one, on the upper end of lower class. Melbourne, like most cities, had more than enough of them to go around. This particular one, however, had developed an unusual feature. Despite the exterior wall remaining intact, a large chunk of the interior was missing.

It hadn't been destroyed in an explosion or collapsed in some kind of structural disaster. There was no debris or collateral damage. It was just gone; an empty space inside a building where an entire apartment should have been. The exterior wall was intact but the rest the apartment was gone, along with portions of the apartments around, above and below it.

What truly made the space remarkable was that it took the form of a perfect sphere. It was as if someone had lifted off the top half of the building and taken out a scoop, before putting the top back on. Walls, floor, carpet and furniture were cut with the smooth precision of a laser. Pipes now just ended, requiring the building's plumbing to be shut down due to spillage.

"It mostly affected the one apartment?" Adam asked.

"Yep," the officer said, looking at the clipboard notes she was holding. "It touched on the surrounding apartments, but centred on this one. The guy above got banged-up pretty bad when the floor under his bed vanished and he dropped two apartments down. It was a lucky thing he didn't land on anyone."

"That's how it was described?" Adam asked. "Just vanishing? No explosion or anything."

"Some of the neighbours described a sucking air noise. Like in movies, when someone shoots out an aeroplane window and the air goes rushing out."

“What about whoever lived in the apartment? Has anyone else been significantly hurt?”

“Just the one man who dropped two floors was hurt badly. There were some minor injuries amongst the other occupants, but not many. We’ve been tracking down residents, making sure they’re either here or otherwise accounted for. The only one we couldn’t find was the sole resident of the apartment that had occupied the centre of the missing space.”

“It happened in the middle of the night.” Adam said. “The poor sod is probably in the same place as the rest of his apartment. Do we have a name?”

“Yeah, it’s...”

She checked her clipboard again.

“Jason Asano.”

“Are you serious?” Adam asked.

“Detective Sergeant, this matter is not a concern for the Victoria police. It’s a federal issue.”

“It’s an apartment building where you claim there was a simple accident. How is that a federal crime?”

“It will go better for everyone of you don’t go around asking questions like that, Detective Sergeant.”

The apartment building had been evacuated of people, ostensibly on the basis of structural instability due to the damage. Now, what looked like a small army of forensics people had claimed a number of the apartments as set up areas and were crawling over the interior like ants.

Adam was in a ground floor apartment where the federal police had set up a command post. Their goal seemed to be to have as small a visible footprint as possible, although they were having little success. The displaced residents and rumours already starting to spread were made all the worse by the media, which had already been present. The military had been conducting one of its unannounced terrorism readiness exercises nearby though the night, part of a new program that was starting to draw press attention.

The local police had been directly and explicitly instructed to completely remove themselves, outside of the uniformed officers being used to secure the exterior of the building. Adam might have left it at that, if the explanation he was given wasn’t so patently absurd.

“You’re seriously going with a gas explosion?” he asked. “A gas explosion in a building with no gas service, blowing a perfectly spherical hole with no debris and a blast

area that completely annihilated everything up to a point and then completely stopping dead. An explosion that no one heard, despite being in a building full of people.”

“Detective Sergeant, we have already asked you nicely to leave this matter be. We highly recommend that you move on and do not give this incident any further thought. Otherwise, we will have to move on from asking, the ramifications of which will fall directly on you and be unambiguously negative.”

Adam glared at the woman. The federal police officer had a nicer suit and nicer hair than him. She was not a large woman but her stern features and short-cropped hair radiated professionalism.

“Are you threatening me?” he asked.

“Yes, Detective Sergeant. You need to forget all about this incident or you will find the weight that drops down on you from a very great height sufficient to squash you and your career like a bug under a shoe.”

Adam glowered. In addition to the feds there were military personnel and some less conventional people busying themselves. There was a group talking quietly amongst themselves that Adam’s trained eye picked out as not being law enforcement or military, in spite of the expensive suits. From the looks of things, however, their presence was wholly unchallenged, unlike his own.

He turned to leave.

“Detective Sergeant,” the federal officer called out.

“What?” he asked.

“I need to know that you won’t interfere further.”

“I’m leaving, aren’t I?”

“You need to tell me that you understand. I want to hear you say it.”

“And I want you to get run over by a bulldozer,” Adam said. “We don’t get everything we want in life.”

“Detective Sergeant, I’d better not hear that you’ve been talking to the media. And if you do, I will hear about it.”

He left, not bothering to respond.

Someone stopped Erika Asano outside the café.

“I just bought your new cookbook!”

“Thank you. I hope you enjoy it.”

“I was so sorry to hear about your brother.”

“Thank you.”

She took a selfie with the fan before going inside, making her way into a secluded booth in the back. She sat down opposite a man who looked like he had slept in his suit. He smelled like he was several days past his last shower but only minutes past his last drink. He had bloodshot eyes and a scratchy beard.

“Hello Detective,” she said, voice and face both filled with concern.

“Not anymore,” Adam said.

“I’m sorry to hear that. I hate to think that I pushed you to...”

“You didn’t push me into anything,” he said. “I walked into this with my eyes wide open.”

“What do you have?” Erika asked. “You didn’t sound optimistic over the phone.”

Adam took a battered folder from the satchel on the seat next to him, placing it on the table. Then he took a flash drive from his pocket, placing it on top of the folder.

“I’ve taken this as far as it will go,” he said. “I’ve been chewing my way around the outside, but there’s no way into the middle. It’s like there’s a giant hole at the centre of all this and nothing that would fit makes any kind of sense.”

“What are you saying?” Erika asked.

“This is as far as it goes,” Adam said, patting the folder. “This is everything I have. There’s some photos in there of the space where your brother’s apartment should be. I shouldn’t have those, so be careful where you flash them around. Or don’t; I don’t care.”

“There’s nowhere else to take the investigation?” Erika asked.

“I’ve put together enough of the puzzle to see that there’s one very big, very weird piece missing. There’s a secret here and I promise you that neither you nor I will be able to crack it. I know it’s somehow connected to all those terrorist readiness drills the military are doing. I know someone is influencing government bodies at an incredibly high level and I know there is some kind of operation working completely in the dark. I don’t know if it’s some kind of off-the-books intelligence program or what, but they have a stupid amount of pull.”

A waitress came by and Erika ordered some tea. Adam ordered coffee.

“I don’t care, as long as it’s strong and hot.”

“So what now?” Erika asked after the waitress walked away.

“Now, I go spend my rent money on bourbon. This is the end of the road, Mrs Asano. There’s a secret here and it’s a lot bigger than you and me. The only thing I kept out of this folder is a number of deaths I’m pretty sure happened to keep that secret. I won’t let you go poking around and get killed too.”

“Are you in danger?” she asked.

Adam let out a bitter laugh.

“Frankly, I’m amazed I’m still alive. I was advised to leave this alone multiple times. Then I was told, then I was fired. Don’t make my mistake. I know you don’t have answers for what happened to your brother, but you need to find a way to let it go.”

“You’re going to sit there having thrown everything into this and tell me to walk away?” she asked.

“Mrs Asano, not everyone who told me to back off had something to hide. They knew what keeping at this would cost me, and they were right. Just look at me. I don’t have anyone. You have family. I know he was your brother, but would he want your family to get hurt chasing answers when he’s already dead?”

Erika’s face scrunched with unwillingness, but she gave a slight nod.

“I don’t like this,” she said.

“The people behind this don’t want you to like it,” Adam said. “They want you to shut up and stop poking into this or they’ll kill you.”

“Are you seriously suggesting I would be murdered by some conspiracy group? That’s absurd.”

“Mrs Asano, those deaths I mentioned? There weren’t any murders. There were car accidents. House fires. Suicides.”

“Which could be exactly what they seem.”

“Suicide will be how they do you, by the way. Celebrity chef kills herself after brother’s tragic death in gas explosion. Friends say she became erratic in the months following her brother’s death, obsessed with conspiracy theories. She was known to associate with disgraced former detective…”

The return of the waitress with their drinks forestalled Erika’s response.

“Do you really expect me to believe any of this?” she asked, once the waitress was gone again.

“I barely believe it,” Adam said with a wry, weary smile. “But remember, you were the one who found me. We both know this thing has stunk from the word go. But don’t make my mistakes. You have people that can still get hurt.”

He placed a hand on the folder.

“This is almost everything I’ve been able to put together, from copies of police reports to my personal notes. You can take it, but I’m asking you not to. Go home and look after your family.”

“Detective… Mr Cosgrove. I did come to you. I can’t help but feel I am, in part, responsible for the circumstance you find yourself in.”

“I may have bought a first-class ticket for the self-pity train, Mrs Asano, but I know who put me where I am, and it wasn’t you.”

She looked at the folder under his hand for a long time before standing up without touching it.

“I’ll take your advice, Mr Cosgrove. I know we probably won’t meet again, but do not hesitate to contact me if you ever need something. I appreciate how much you’ve sacrificed looking for the truth about my brother.”

“It was never about you or your brother for me, Mrs Asano.”

“I appreciate it, nonetheless.”

She took out some money, leaving it next to her untouched tea.

“For the drinks.”

Adam shuffled wearily through the bottle shop. Standing in front of the bourbon was a woman dressed in an exquisite suit. She was looking right at him. His memory stirred.

“You’re one of them,” he said. “You were there, when Asano’s apartment went wherever the hell it went.”

“I was there, yes, although we never actually met. You have a good eye and a sharp memory, Mr Cosgrove. It’s what makes you a good investigator.”

Adam snorted.

“Being a good investigator is about legwork and persistence,” he said. “You can shove that Sherlock Holmes crap up your arse.”

He moved forward to take a bottle and she stepped into his path.

“Lady, if you think I won’t kick your arse right here then you’re underestimating how little I’ve got to lose anymore.”

Adam drew a sharp breath as the woman’s presence seemed to strangely swell until it felt like she was towering over him, despite not having moved. He suddenly felt incredibly vulnerable and exposed, with no idea why. He fought back against the feeling by calling on the wellspring of anger that had been simmering inside of him for months, grabbing the front of the woman’s suit with both hands. Her own hands gripped his forearms like a pair of industrial clamps, pulling his hands off of her with a mechanical inexorability.

“Jesus, lady. Are you a frigging terminator?”

“Mr Cosgrove, I’m here to offer you the thing you have been chasing since this all began. The things that destroyed your life. The secret you’ve been circling without ever being able to see.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“We’ve been watching your efforts, Mr Cosgrove. You are a dogged and determined investigator who looks beyond the obvious and is unflinching when others lack resolve.”

“And hasn’t that worked out well for me?”

“Mr Cosgrove, come work for us. All the answers you’ve been looking for are just the beginning of what you’ll receive.”

“You want me to work for you?” he asked, incredulous. “Everything you’ve done and you want me to throw in with you?”

“Mr Cosgrove, your life is not in a good position right now.”

“Because of you, you wretched harpy.”

“We can make amends and more.”

“And if I tell you to shove it up your arse?”

“Then you can drink yourself to death in ignorance,” she said. “You don’t have the credibility to cause us any problems. Convincing Erika Asano to let it go was a smart move. You were wrong though; it wouldn’t have been suicide.”

Adam’s hand flashed out, snatching a bottle from the shelf and swinging it at her head. Her reflexes were too fast for him to follow and the next thing he knew he was stumbling back and falling over, the bottle in her hand.

“That’s disappointing,” she said as she put the bottle back on the shelf. “I think you could have been quite remarkable, Mr Cosgrove.”

She waked away as Adam pulled himself to his feet. She turned the corner and he didn’t see her again.

Adam walked out of the bottle shop with a half dozen bottles in a cardboard box. He glanced around the parking lot, habitually taking in the details. There was a man who had been sitting in a car before Adam arrived, who now got out and started walking in his direction.

“She’s a bitch isn’t she?” the man called out. He was wearing a pastel shirt with the top two buttons undone and a white jacket over white slacks. He was white, looked around Adam’s age and had an American accent.

“Excuse me?” Adam asked.

“Miranda,” the man said. “She probably didn’t tell you her name, though, did she?”

“Look, Miami Vice,” Adam said. “I’ve had my fill of mysterious pricks, so how about you sod off.”

“Yeah, I get why you’re bitter. Can I call you Adam?”

“You can bugger off.”

Adam resumed the walk to his car.

“She’s not the only one who can tell you the big secret, you know,” the man called after him. Adam stopped and turned around.

“Save it, mate. I’m not buying.”

The man chuckled.

“I’m Dash,” he said. “And yeah, I’d like to recruit you as well. Say what you want about Miranda, but she knows good material when she sees it.”

“I told her to stick it up her arse,” Adam said. “You can stick it up her arse too.”

Dash laughed again.

“You know, I like you Adam. Here’s the difference between me and Miranda. She’ll let you in on the big secret if you agree to join her little group and follow orders like a good boy. Me, though? I’m going to tell you the secret. Right here, right now. If you want to throw in with us after, then great. If not, then all it cost me was a little time.”

“You’re okay with me knowing, then just going my own way?”

“My organisation isn’t like Miranda’s. We don’t care about keeping the secret. The thing is, the secret wants to be told. Every year it gets harder and harder to keep it under wraps, and we have no interest in helping.”

“Then what do you do?”

“We’re getting ready for the day that the secret isn’t a secret anymore. I’ll be happy to tell you all about it, but you’re going to want answers first. What is this great, big, important secret that I’m walking around?”

“You’re going to tell me, just like that?”

“If I just told you, you wouldn’t believe me,” Dash said. “I’m going to show you.”

Chapter 264

Beyond Our Ability to Control

The Adventure Society and the Magic Society had both sent people flooding into the astral space. For the Adventure Society, it was a precious chance to rapidly advance some of their more promising members. It was currently ideal for skilled bronze-rankers and even freshly ranked-up silvers to advance their abilities. For the Magic Society, it was a chance to get a handle on the advanced astral magic the Builder's cult had been wielding. For both, it was a chance to prepare for the battle against the Builder's forces still escalating around the world.

Once again working for the Magic Society, Clive's first task was to return to the astral space from which he had recently emerged. It would only remain accessible for a limited time, but now the limitations of rank were removed from entry, it was a treasure trove of knowledge and opportunity. It was also a treasure trove of actual treasure, but that was the Adventure Society's area.

Clive had not revealed the materials that Knowledge had given first to Jason and then to him. He implicitly understood that the goddess had already been pushing boundaries. That said, any of it he could link to what they found in the astral space, he did so immediately.

He attributed any suspicious leaps of insight to having studied the Builder's magic during his previous time in the astral space. It wasn't exactly a lie. To the best of his understanding, the information Knowledge had given them was taken from the Builder's people. It was also true that Clive had studied materials they had taken from the Builder cult's two camp sites.

The cult's original arrival site had a building apparently occupied by the cult's ritualists and containing much of the material handed over by Knowledge. That freed up Clive's ability to share the information and eased his scruples. He abhorred the idea of being credited for magical breakthroughs he did not actually make himself.

Atop one of the portal towers at the edge of the city, Clive was explaining some of the magic involved with the portal arches, although the tower arches were still inactive. His audience was a group of Magic Society astral magic scholars who had portalled in to Greenstone from far and wide. Information that would help them stop the Builder from seizing more astral spaces was currently the world's most precious commodity. Any doubts the assemblage held about Clive's capabilities as a provincial scholar had been quickly expelled by his expertise.

The group were protected from the dangers of the astral space by a contingent of Adventure Society members, led by a silver-ranker and including Clive's own team. Although they would each be following different pursuits in the near future, for the moment they followed him into the astral space. Despite the assurances of the Adventure Society that they would all be kept safe, the team would not be dislodged. They were not going to lose another member to that place.

Of Clive's team, only Belinda had joined the Magic Society people in listening to Clive's lecture. The rest of the adventures were placed around the edge of the tower. These were not Greenstone locals but more capable imports; part of a much larger group brought in for the exploration of the astral space.

Only the most elite of Greenstone's own adventurers had even been allowed to participate. This was a small handful of bronze-rankers, including Henrietta Geller and Cassandra Mercer, both of whom were edging up on silver-rank. Beth Cavendish and her team had reached bronze-rank while Humphrey's team were in the astral space, although they were not as advanced as Humphrey and the others. Months in the pressure-cooker of the astral space had allowed them to leapfrog their peers.

Humphrey stood right at the edge of the tower, eyes panning from the water stretching out to the horizon and back to the city. Experienced eyes picked out the potential approach points of the familiar buildings of the crumbling brick, struggling under fecund jungle. Next to him was the silver-ranker, a man with wild dark hair named Pranesh.

"You don't need to be so vigilant," Pranesh said.

"If you don't respect this place, it will kill you," Humphrey said.

"The Builder's vessel is gone and we mopped up what was left of his people," Pranesh said. "All that's left are monsters."

"This place keeps dangerous secrets," Humphrey said. "I'm not so foolish as to think we found them all."

"Don't bother trying to tempt my little brother into slacking off," Henrietta said, walking over to them. "They train all us Gellers, but Humphrey is the measuring stick, now. He always embodied the training, but now he's been through the fire. He's exactly the adventurer we're trying to make."

"You're exaggerating, Henri," Humphrey said.

"See? Modesty. Just like good little Geller boy."

Nearby, Sophie was glancing back at Belinda, seeing her engrossed in Clive's impromptu lecture. She wandered over to stand next to her friend, giving Belinda a

companionable shoulder bump. Belinda flashed her a smile before returning her gaze back to Clive.

“You should do it,” Sophie said quietly.

Clive had asked Belinda to resume her previous position as his research assistant. Since that meant separating from Sophie, if only temporarily, she had declined the offer.

“You’re going to go off with Emir, looking for your family,” Belinda said. “A family who, as best anyone can tell, are some kind of ancient order of murderers. How can I leave you alone for that?”

Sophie glanced back at Humphrey and Neil. Humphrey was his usual, diligent self. Neil had his legs hanging off the edge of the tower, Cassandra Mercer sitting next to him as they chatted quietly.

“I won’t be alone,” Sophie said. “It’s not just you and me anymore.”

“You’re saying that there’s no way to stabilise the portal and maintain access to the astral space?” Lorelei asked. She, along with the other Magic Society members, were still struggling to get their heads around the astral magic concepts Clive was explaining.

“Maintaining a stable portal isn’t the issue,” Clive said, patting the portal arch he was standing next to. “This isn’t an astral space, in the traditional sense. It’s a vehicle. A transcendent-rank vehicle in the shape of an astral space. A vehicle that is now slowly pulling away from our world, which is beyond our ability to control.”

“Why is it pulling away?” Lorelei asked.

Lorelei was a fair-skinned woman with blonde hair. The beautifying effect of her bronze rank hadn’t made her as radiant as someone like Sophie, but she still had the healthy, athletic look of a magically idealised body. The effects on the body of ranking up were more pronounced on those who didn’t already have the looks and physique of a Humphrey or a Sophie. For them it was akin to polishing an already stunning gemstone, rather than carving a beautiful sculpture from a mundane rock.

“The Builder was taking control of this place,” Clive said. “Only a being of his level could actually do so, but we were lucky. The limits of his vessel meant that he still required an intermediary control, namely, the tower now standing in the centre of the astral space.”

All eyes turned as Clive gestured. From their position on their own tower, they could see the central tower even from the edge of the city. The thirty storey edifice was the tallest building in the astral space by a factor of six.

“As you all saw descending the tower after your arrival,” Clive said, “It isn’t a building in the traditional sense. Only the bottom floors have space for occupation, and even they only have doorways with no doors.”

They had all arrived at the astral space through the portal Clive had appropriated from a tower like the one on which they stood. Since then, he had done a more thorough job of keeping it open, compared to the rushed connection they had made on their initial escape.

“When the Builder started taking control of this place,” Clive said. “We had no means to seize that control. The best we could do was interfere with his intermediary mechanism, the central tower, inverting the considerable energies involved. This causing the vehicle to draw away from our world instead of breaching it. Using the towers the Order of the Reaper built around the Builder’s giant golems was just a bonus, as was siphoning off enough power to fuel a portal. If the dimensional forces involved hadn’t been just right, and if the Order of the Reaper hadn’t designed these portals to use the golems as a power source, then my team and I would have died without ever escaping this place. Frankly, I’m amazed that it worked at all; I really hadn’t expected it to.”

“You never told us that!” Neil called out from behind the assembled Magic Society people.

“What good would that have done?” Clive asked him.

“I could have played the odds,” Neil said. “Thrown in with the Builder and sold the rest of you out.”

The assembled strangers looked at Neil with shocked disbelief, as did Cassandra, standing next to him. His team just shook their heads.

Pranesh was the first to detect the approaching adventurers with his silver-rank senses. They were bronze-rank, moving fast, with auras flecked with panic. Then he sensed the wave of monsters following after them.

“Idiots,” he muttered shaking his head. The point of not using the locals was to avoid stupid mistakes.

“What is it?” Humphrey asked.

“It looks like the patrol team ran into one of those monster packs still roaming around,” Pranesh said. “They’ve led it right back here.”

“I though you people were meant to be the good adventurers,” Neil said, overhearing.

“We were,” Pranesh said, then called out for the group’s attention and explained the imminent situation.

“There is a wave of monsters heading this way. From the proportions I’m sensing, two-thirds of the pack are bronze-rank and the rest are silver. As for absolute numbers, I’m not sure, but it’s a lot. Adventurers, gather on me. Magic Society people, gather at the centre of the tower. Unless the pack had flyers amongst them, we’ll make sure the fighting doesn’t get near you.”

Clive left the scholars to join his team, lining up at the edge of the tower. Lorelei followed, looking concerned.

“You don’t have to fight,” she assured him.

“You don’t get it,” Neil said. “We’re here to kick ass and chew bubblegum, and we never actually found out what bubblegum was.”

“You have gotten so weird,” Cassandra told Neil. “You used to be the sensible one. You’re a lot more like Jason, now.”

“I think he always was,” Humphrey said as he conjured his dragon armour and giant wing sword. “He just never had the chance to be himself when he had your brother to deal with. Too much responsibility and too few people to rely on. Now he can afford to let himself loose a little.”

“I think he may have gotten a little too loose,” Cassandra said.

“You know I’m still right here,” Neil said. “You’re talking about me like I’m a child with behaviour problems.”

“Can’t imagine why,” Sophie said.

They lined up on the edge of the tower as their senses began to pick up the oncoming monsters.

“This is good,” Sophie said. “I haven’t killed a monster in more than a week and it was starting to feel weird.”

“This monster train is what we did to the Builder cult,” Belinda said. “You don’t suppose this is some leftover cult people getting their own back?”

“I hope so,” Sophie said. “I never got the chance to thank them as thoroughly as I wanted to.”

“I’ve never faced this many monsters before,” Cassandra said. Neil reached out and gave her hand a reassuring squeeze.

“Don’t worry,” he told her. “This is what we do.”

The adventurers confronting the monster wave were caught up in a sprawling pitched battle that filled the overgrown streets and spread into the ruined buildings. The monsters held a massive advantage in numbers as well as rank, with numerous silver-rankers

amongst them. There were no second-rate adventurers present, however, only elites. They were not overwhelmed, many of the bronze-rankers able to go one-on-one against the silver-rank monsters, although there was no such thing as a clean fight amongst the chaos.

The only silver-rank adventurer, Pranesh, was a literal dervish of swords. Surrounded by conjured swords, they whirled around him like a dust devil of steel, carving a path through the battlefield. He served as a pressure valve for the adventurers, stepping in when fights got too hairy.

The ranged attackers, like Clive, had prime position atop the high tower. Clive himself had set up a row of ritual circles to empower the ranged attackers standing on them. He had added further circles floating at the end of his weapons as he blasted away with his wand and staff. Next to him was Emily, the celestine archer from Beth Cavendish's team. Her gold hair was trimmed short in a practical pixie cut, leaving nothing to fall in her face as her eyes darted back and forth over the battlefield.

With a racial gift evolution that gave her the human aptitude for special attacks, she was conjuring magical arrows by the multitude and raining them down on the monsters. The power to conjure her deadly Reaper's Bow had been bestowed by the awakening stone of the Reaper she earned in the trials. Her myriad essence gave her an array of powerful attacks that combined deadly precision with area attacks. Her gathering and onslaught essences were less discriminate, with powerful charge attacks and arrows imbued with potent explosive magic.

On the ground, the other adventures confronted the monsters directly. Beth and Humphrey's team worked together, joined by Cassandra and Henrietta. The pair's own teams had, like them, returned to their homelands in readiness for the monster surge that still refused to arrive.

The shardstorm pangolin was a silver-rank monster that could send steel-hard and razor-sharp scales flying from its body, then control them telekinetically to create a storm of blades. The effect was not unlike Pranesh and his sword dervish, but the scales-blades were smaller and far more numerous. A trio of the pangolins were overlapping their blade zones, creating an obscuring cloud of biting teeth.

The shifting blade wall was thick enough that even attacks were being absorbed, the hardy scales deflecting physical projectiles and absorbing magic. With multiple monsters in the same space, even area effects weren't breaking through.

Sophie had learned important lessons from her battles in the astral space. The biggest one was that avoiding attacks would only get her so far if she did so little damage

that the enemy could ignore her and go after her team. It was the hard-fought battles against silver-rank enemies that had taught her how to ramp up her damage, if the enemies were up to the task.

She dashed into the middle of the blade storm, knowing that just few seconds of exposure would tear her to ribbons. She activated her Moment of Oneness power, absorbing all damage she took for two seconds, after which she had four more seconds to deliver that damage against an opponent in an attack or suffer it all retroactively.

The scale blades blasted her like rain in a hurricane, even as she pushed through the dense cloud at speed. Her scant seconds of protection ended before she could break through and for a fleeting moment, was subject to the full fury of the blades. They slashed open her armour and flesh alike, leaving her cut and bloody in an instant.

It was only a moment before she reached the eye of the storm, close enough to the monsters that they would not risk cutting themselves with their wild blades. Their control was crude, so they gave themselves a comfortable margin, especially with three together combining efforts.

It had only been a single moment that Sophie was subjected to the razor cloud, but it was enough to leave her a ragged, bloody wreck. Her expensive, bronze-rank armour was in tatters, while the flesh under it had fared little better. By the time she reached the pangolins, she was painted red in her own blood, her silver hair looking like a sword bloodied in battle.

The weakness of the stormshard pangolin was that in casting off its scales, it was left vulnerable to anything that made it past the blade wall. Only the head retained scales and Sophie could have ignored it to go for the exposed body, but she didn't. A bloody fist landed on the long face of the middle pangolin.

Sophie had been subjected to countless attacks from the blades, immediately pushing her Karmic Warrior ability to its limits. The damage reduction it gave her was the only reason she was still standing after making it through the blades, bloody and ragged as she was. The real reason she subjected herself to such suffering, though, was the ramping increase the ability gave to her power and spirit attributes.

With the ability pushed to its maximum, her power and spirit attributes now rivalled a silver-ranker, giving her a spirit-coin-like boost without the short duration or the backlash.

Sophie didn't just release the damage absorbed by her Moment of Oneness power in the punch she landed on the pangolin. She also unleashed her counter-execute, Deny the Reaper. The effect of the ability was massively inflated by her severely injured state.

Sophie's ability was enhanced as Neil sent her a Bolster power from somewhere else in the battlefield, flooding her with power. The healer's ability to monitor a sprawling battle and pick the perfect moment for his abilities had been refined by their experiences in the astral space. His timing was now sharper than the scale-blades of the pangolins.

The result of these cumulative effects coming together in Sophie's fist was an explosion of damage, no small part of which was transcendent, right into the creature's skull.

Sophie's Boundary Breaker power eliminated the damage reduction from rank disparity, and the transcendent damage would have ignored it anyway. Even so, silver-rank was silver-rank and the monster didn't die. Sufficient damage from a single strike to inflict sufficiently massive head trauma have a monster fall comatose would be startling enough from a silver-ranker, let alone a bronze. That it was a defence specialist rather than an attacker was all the more startling.

Sophie was recovering fast with the massive burst of immediate healing from her counter-execute, which also left behind a potent heal over time effect. Added to the healing from her Karmic Warrior ability, it left her in a far better state than her bloody visage and ragged armour would suggest. The other two pangolins were looking at her, standing beside their unconscious companion.

Even ramped up to the maximum, Sophie could only do so much damage on an ongoing basis. The kind of massive damage attack she just unleashed took specific circumstances and the use of abilities now on cooldown. She was undeterred, since all she needed was to raise her damage from a low range to a moderate one. If she couldn't attack hard, she would just attack fast enough to make up the difference.

It had only been a few moments in which she had rushed through their defence wall to attack the pangolins. They had sensed her presence, but never imagined the bronze-ranker charging through their barrier to attack, allowing her to blindside them. They had not reacted by the time the first of the number was felled and Sophie activated her Eternal Moment power before they could.

Time seemed to stop for her and she started racking up wind blades that froze as soon as she unleashed them. With her amplified spirit attribute, each was much more potent than normal. When she rejoined the normal flow of time, the blades gouged their way into the exposed flesh of one of the remaining pangolins.

Both monsters recalled their scales to protect their bodies, cancelling the blade storm. In the case of the injured one, blood from Sophie's wind blade attacks seeped out from between the scales. It immediately fled and Sophie let it go, turning to the other. It

reoriented the scales on its body to cover itself in blades, then curled into a ball and rolled at Sophie.

Such a charge attack would have been too slow to hit her even if it had time to gather momentum, which it hadn't. The simple reality was that without the blade wall, the pangolin was far less of a threat. The largest part of this was that other adventurers were no longer held at bay, allowing them to move in on the beleaguered monsters.

In the aftermath of the battle, Pranesh and Humphrey stood atop the tower once more, watching as adventurers looted the sea of monster corpses, sending plumes of rainbow smoke into the air. Neil alone had covered most of the battle in his aura, which allowed him to loot the creatures within. Since he lacked a personal storage space, he wasn't able to embezzle, making him a popular source of looting in spite of two others with looting powers. The spoils were collected up to be disseminated later.

"Your guardian doesn't fight like a guardian," Pranesh said to Humphrey.

"She's always fought against anyone telling her what to do," Humphrey said. "Even her own power set. If she wants to attack, gods help anyone who tries to stop her."

"You need to get her to fight less recklessly," Pranesh said.

"She's fought hard to realise that she's strongest when walking on a knife edge," Humphrey said. "I won't tell her to throw away everything she's gained."

Pranesh frowned, but didn't try to convince Humphrey further. Humphrey frowned in turn. His secondary power evolution was a sacrifice power and he empathised with Sophie's bloody dedication. He had been forbidden from talking about that in no uncertain terms, both by his mother and a startling high-level Magic Society official. Humphrey and the rest of his team had all been sworn to secrecy.

"You've got the look of someone thinking about doing something for my own good," Humphrey said. "If you make the mistake of trying to interfere with my team, it will go very badly for you."

"Are you threatening me, Young Master Geller?" Pranesh asked.

"You're damn right I am."

Neil finished healing up Sophie. Belinda conjured up a privacy screen with her power to create simple objects and she pulled off what was left of her armour. It was the only thing intact enough to stay on her, the rest of the ragged clothes falling away. She slung the bloodied armour over the privacy screen.

“That’s going to take all day to self-repair,” she said as she tipped a bottle of crystal wash over her head. She tipped the last of it over the armour before pulling on a fresh set of clothes supplied from Belinda’s storage space, handed over the top of the screen. She looked at the empty bottle of crystal wash, remembering the man who loved it more than anyone. The bottle shattered in her fist, drawing fresh blood.

Chapter 265

A Time For Parting

When Isabella Pantero heard the bell on the door to her bakery jingle, she came from out back to behind the glass counter.

“Mr Asano!” she exclaimed. “I was told that you died!”

He looked quite unlike his usual self, the confident grin replaced with a furtive expression dominated by a bushy moustache. She knew he had gone away on some kind of adventurer business, hearing just recently that he failed to return alive.

“Coming back from the dead is kind of my thing,” Asano said. “I want biscuits, please.”

“I’m glad to see you made it back after all, Mr Asano. What kind of biscuits, and how many?”

Asano reached into his pockets, grabbing handfuls of loose objects that he dropped onto the countertop. There were spirit coins, iron, bronze and even silver. Mostly it was roughly coin-shaped objects, like buttons, and flat, round stones.

“I have this many monies,” Asano said.

“Are you alright, Mr Asano?”

“Biscuits!”

Isabella sorted through the assembled debris on the countertop. The inclusion of a pair of silver-rank coins alone was sufficient to empty out the store and then some.

“Mr Asano, this is far more than enough for all the biscuits we have.”

Asano’s face lit up. Soon after, he was navigating his way out of the store with multiple bags clutched in each hand.

“Mr Asano, what about the rest of your money?” Isabella called out as he awkwardly navigated the door.

“Thank you, nice lady!” Asano responded, stepping outside. “I got them!”

He hurried out of sight, only to pass in front of the glass storefront moments later, riding what appeared to be a flying tortoise. As she cleared the coins and other objects from the counter, she considered it to be at least the third strangest encounter she had with the eccentric customer.

“He’s acting out,” Humphrey said. “He misses Jason too.”

“That’s no excuse to wear Jason’s face,” Sophie snarled. “Does he not understand what it does to us to see it?”

“No, Sophie, he doesn’t,” Humphrey explained calmly. “He’s smarter since ranking up, but he’s still a child, with a child’s mind.”

“You need to make him understand,” she said.

“Maybe you could do that,” Humphrey suggested. “I know talking about your feelings isn’t really your thing, but maybe you can share with him. It might help him to understand.”

They were making their way through the trade hall toward Gilbert Bertinelli’s shop. Under normal circumstances, Gilbert dealt exclusively in menswear. He had made an exception in the case of modifying Sophie’s armour, which had originally been made by another craftsperson on Gilbert’s recommendation.

Gilbert had undergone a significant transformation during their time away, now that he was a full-blown essence user. His hair had filled out, while his physique went from plump and visibly squishy to firmly barrel-chested. He looked ten years younger, finally showing some resemblance to his silver-ranked brother, Bertram.

“Here we are,” Gilbert said, presenting the modified armour to Sophie and Humphrey. “I’ve incorporated the hydra leather and significantly enhanced the self-repair aspect of the enchantment. The critical areas still have hard-panel protection, but those sections won’t self-repair as quickly as the softer armour.”

“That’s fine,” Sophie said. The armour looked closer to what Jason’s had, with increased areas of dark grey amongst the black, although her version was still more form-fitting than his combat robes.

“Unfortunately,” Gilbert continued, “enhancing the self-repair came at the cost of diminishing other effects, such as the poison resistance. It does now slightly enhance self-healing effects, however, so I believe you’ll find it a worthwhile exchange. To be honest, I was somewhat worried about the modifications, but I’m rather satisfied with the result.”

“So am I,” Sophie said, then asked about the price. Gilbert was adamant in refusal of any money.

“I’ve heard what you all did. Not the details, of course – I’m not that well connected – but I know you saved us all from something terrible. Consider this a last service for Mr Asano. He truly was my favourite customer.”

“That’s nice of you to say,” Humphrey said.

“Oh, I’m not just saying, it, Young Master Geller; he genuinely was. He always knew what he needed, yet was flexible in how those needs were met. Firm, as necessary, yet open to suggestion. He was personable, patient, courteous and gracious. He appreciated salesmanship and was a source of wondrous materials. And, of course, was always willing

to spend what it took to meet his needs. No offence, Young Master Geller, but he was most likely the best customer I'll ever have."

Gilbert gave an awkward smile, having said more than he intended. "I apologise, sir and madam, I've overstepped my..."

Both Gilbert and Humphrey were startled when Sophie embraced Gilbert in a hug, throwing her arms around his barrel chest. He somewhat awkwardly patted her on the back.

Two men sat in a café, just off Greenstone's divine square. Both wore the robes of clergymen for the church of the Healer. One was Neil, who had long been a churchman. The church of the healer, like most faiths, made little call on the time of adventuring clergy with a lot of potential. The benefits of having high-ranking members outweighed the need to keep low-ranking essence users under their thumb. It was a widespread, but not universal approach, with the church of Dominion being the most prominent outlier.

The other man was much newer to the cloth. He had been working with the church of the Healer for more than a year, first at his clinic, then more directly in the last couple of months. Having grown up in an area where the local Healer church was so corrupt, travelling around and seeing the church's work elsewhere had been a revelation. Watching the church's dedication to helping people had compelled him to join their ranks.

"My understanding," Neil said to Jory, "is that your low-cost potions are predicated on local ingredients. Does that make them of limited use, elsewhere? Especially given the rather specific nature of the delta's environment."

"It was never my potion recipes the church was after," Jory explained. "It's my research methodologies. If it was just about recipes, then the church would be better-off leaving me here to cook up as many potions as I could. The reality has been exactly the opposite; I've done very little hands-on alchemy lately."

He paused to sip at his tea.

"It's all lectures," Jory continued. "Teaching people how to replicate my results by researching their own local ingredients."

"And that's been working?"

"It's still quite early into the program," Jory said. "It took me years before I started seeing results. The idea is for others to do what I did, just faster, with the benefits of what I learned along the way."

"But you think people can do it?"

“Flexibility is the key,” Jory said. “You have to develop your recipes in accordance with the ingredients you can get a lot of for cheap. That’s the only real lesson, because most alchemists take the opposite approach. They start with the recipe they want and try to make the ingredients do that. Ultimately, I’m not trying to impart a skill, but a perspective.”

“But what if the local ingredients aren’t any good for making cheap healing and mana potions? Those are what people are after, right? Especially with the spreading conflict with the Builder cult. It’s hard to imagine how the prick managed to recruit so many of them.”

“Distribution is the other aspect of the church’s program. I lucked out, with the natural affinities of the delta’s magic, which is what inspired me to explore this as a field of alchemy. Not everyone has that good fortune; they have to make what they can make. That’s where the church comes in establishing a distribution network of cheap alchemy products. Whatever you people make will be useful to someone. As long as you have sufficiently robust distribution, you can trade what you have for what you need.”

“And the church is playing middleman?”

“The god of trade is working with us, so we don’t encroach on their territory with what will hopefully be a huge undertaking. The idea is to prevent the kind of gouging that relying on the usual mercantile system would inevitably draw and prevent the whole system from getting bogged down by cartels.”

“And the Trade god is alright with that?”

“We struck a deal. The essentials, like healing items, are going to be shipped at cost. The rest will have small margins, so as not to mess it all up, but the volume should still make it worthwhile.”

“I hope you aren’t trying to recruit me into joining your administrative team.”

“Definitely not,” Jory said with a chuckle. “For that kind of work, solid logisticians and administrators are more valuable than essence users. The church has high hopes for you. They want you to get up to silver, even gold, so you can really promote the church’s interests.”

Jory’s expression turned sombre.

“In the days to come,” he said, “we’re going to need you on the front lines.”

“Front lines?” Neil asked, sitting up sharply. “Are you talking about war?”

“Haven’t you already been to battle?” Jory asked. “The Builder cult may be done here in Greenstone, but we’re a small part of a big world. I’ve also been hearing rumbling from the Council of Faiths. There are rumours that the other gods will declare Purity a fallen god.”

“What would that even entail?” Neil asked.

“I don’t have any reliable information on that front,” Jory said. “From what I’ve heard, it involves the other gods sanctioning Purity, whatever that means. Suppressing the church, somehow. I think the idea is that the existing clergy are meant to step away from the church, while any who refuse to are... dealt with.”

“That sounds ominous,” Neil said.

“Yep,” Jory agreed. “I’ve only heard this ‘sanction’ the gods are looking at in vague terms, but it sounds as bad, or worse. I think the idea is that the god of Purity either gets brought into line or somehow replaced, after which the clergy who stepped away from the old church can return to the new one.”

“That sounds way above our level,” Neil said.

“Good thing Jason isn’t around to stick his head right in the middle.”

“Oh gods, he would too,” Neil said with a wincing chortle. “He’d run around, firing his mouth off and making trouble. Mostly for us.”

The pair shared a sad smile.

“I’m sorry we won’t get to see it,” Jory said.

“Of course you are,” Neil said. “You’re not on his team.”

Then Neil’s expression fell, his gaze moving down to his hands, speaking his next words softly.

“You weren’t the one responsible for keeping him alive.”

In the morning, Jason’s team would be parting ways, if only temporarily, to go off on varying assignments. Clive and Belinda would be working with the Magic Society, while Sophie, Humphrey and Neil were going with Emir.

The farewell gathering was held in one of the sprawling bar-lounges in Emir’s cloud palace, the largest collection of Jason’s friends since his memorial service, more than a month earlier. There were a few notable absences; people who had left Greenstone and only returned briefly for the memorial.

Prince Valdis had portalled in for the service, but was once again back in the Mirror Kingdom, where they had their own battles with the Builder cult. Gary had retired from adventuring after Jason and his team’s departure, returning to his home and becoming a full-time weaponsmith. He had also been portalled in for the memorial but had departed immediately after.

Rufus was unsure when his big friend would return to the adventuring life, if ever. Rufus' team had vanished around him and he was left feeling adrift. He had thrown himself into developing the training annex project, giving him some much-needed purpose.

Jason's team had laid claim to a cluster of seats around a low table, with Jory sharing his plush cloud chair with Belinda.

"You aren't worried about Clive luring away your lady with the sexually-charged lifestyle of the research academic?" Neil asked Jory.

"Nope," Jory said confidently. The kiss on the cheek he received as a reward left a big grin on his face.

Next to them, Sophie was sitting with puppy Stash on her lap, absently scratching him behind the ears. As had been the case since waking up to find that Jason had died covering their escape, her expression shifted between unreadably blank and a dour veneer pasted over a rage that had no place to go. Humphrey, looking at her with concern, picked up his glass the from the table in between them and held it up.

"Without Jason Asano," he said, "we wouldn't all be here. He didn't care what my name was or who my family were. He became a true friend, which was always hard for me. And he led me to finding many more."

Neil picked up his own glass and raised it.

"He became a friend to me, even though I hated his smug face," he said, getting a laugh.

"I never much thought I needed friends," Clive said, raising his glass. "Jason taught me that I was wrong as he reawakened a passion for adventuring I thought was long dead."

"I watched Jason come in day after day and heal people no one else cared about," Jory said.

"Except you," Belinda said.

"The day I met Jason," Jory continued, "he had the crap kicked out of him by a couple of priests of the healer. Which he completely brought on himself, just to be clear. Afterwards, he grinned at me and said he'd rather be the guy that got his butt kicked than the guy who didn't. I knew that I'd never go as far as he did, but he helped me to realise that some things are worth the price we pay. He went and died, proving it, sending my most precious person back to me."

"Jason saved Sophie and me when we needed it most," Belinda. "He gave us new lives. You all helped us, but without him, you either wouldn't or couldn't. I don't blame

anyone for that. Who would go so far for strangers, for no better reason than we needed him to? And possibly because Sophie looks like that. She makes guys go a bit funny.”

The group laughed again, except for Sophie.

“Jason saved some of us at the beginning,” Sophie said. “He saved all of us and more at the end. Everyone in this city. If I had the choice, I’d bring him back and let the city burn; I don’t think they’re worth his life.”

Everyone looked awkward, not knowing what to say. Sophie raised her glass to join the others.

“But he did,” Sophie said, her sombre voice getting lighter. “So I’m going to try live the life he saved, in the way he’d want me to live it.”

The others gave her bittersweet smiles and nodded as they clinked their glasses together.

“To Jason Asano,” Humphrey toasted.

Chapter 266

Old Secrets

Dawn was a celestine. She had a startling beauty of a diamond-ranker, with alabaster skin and ruby hair, perfectly matched with her eyes. Her flowing robes were off-white, accented with muted yellow and orange. She was at the top of a tower in the pocket city-universe of Interstice, in the city region of Fuego. She looked out over the city as she waited for someone to arrive.

Fuegos was a region dominated by the cult of the World-Phoenix, which was completely reflected in the appearance. Interstice had no sun, yet light shone from the sky, making the spires of red, yellow and orange crystal seem like towers of fire. There were parks that mixed perpetual autumn colours with trees that had actual fire instead of leaves. The flames did not consume the branches or cause any harm to the yellow grass or surrounding trees.

The tower upon which Dawn stood was the tallest and most glorious of those spires. The way the light caught the crystal mosaic of the flat rooftop made it shine like a garden of flames. A second person joined her on the rooftop, making their way up stairs from inside the tower. Very few things in existence could escape Dawn's peak diamond-rank senses, but she did not turn to meet the new arrival.

Helsveth was a draconian whose glorious red and gold scales would have been camouflage on the crystal tower if not for a white robe, very similar to that worn by Dawn. Helsveth approached the other woman with a humility rarely seen in the draconian people. She moved closer and bowed deeply, even though Dawn was facing the other way.

"First Sister," Helsveth greeted.

"Please," Dawn said, turning around, giving Helsveth a warm smile. "Soon, you will be First Sister and I will join the ranks of the Hierophants. Please dispense with the formalities when we alone."

"First Sister..."

"You have much yet to learn, Second Sister, and it will be much easier if we can stand shoulder to shoulder."

Helsveth gave a nod, albeit an awkward and uncertain one.

"I have a task to perform soon," Dawn said. "I will be leisurely about it and take my time. In my absence, I will have you assume my full duties. It will be good experience for you."

"I will do my utmost to live up to your expectations, First Sister."

“I’m not the one you need to be concerned with,” Dawn said. “Acting as First Servant, even in a temporary capacity, means it is the World-Phoenix itself whose needs you must attend to.”

“Of course, First Sister.”

Dawn frowned, rubbing her chin absently as she gave Helsveth an assessing look.

“This is no good,” she said. “Clearly, you are holding me in too much reverence.”

“Apologies, First Sister,” Helsveth said hurriedly, looking worried.

“It’s fine,” Dawn assured her. “I was much the same in your position. The lesson I received will serve just as well for you. You and I are going to take a trip, Second Sister, and you will see what is deserving of reverence. Come with me.”

Great fiery wings appeared behind Dawn and she launched herself from the tower and into the air. Behind Helsveth wings also appeared, but these were green and silver, made from a shifting cloud of sparkling crystals that caught the light. She followed as Dawn flew over the city before plunging fearlessly down, plummeting into a shaft that lead into the earth. Helsveth dropped down less aggressively, descending in a graceful spiral.

The shaft was quite large, leading underground to what was called the arrival and departure square, although its subterranean nature made it a cube. This was the location through which all comers and goers arrived and departed the physical reality. The magical barriers preventing dimensional transgression outside the arrival and departure squares were some of the largest magical arrays in existence.

The underground area was lit by powerful glow stones set into the walls and ceiling. The square itself was divided into different areas, marked out by floating magical lights. It was managed by local functionaries who recorded all transits and assigned travellers a zone to make the transition to the astral, with magical arrows to guide them to their spot.

No one was exempt from these records, even the most vaunted of individuals. The square had no facilities for dimensional travel itself, offering no more amenities than being the only part of the city where dimensional travel was not blocked. As such, it was a space primarily occupied by gold and silver-rankers, who had the abilities or items required themselves.

Despite dealing with such people every day, the arrival of the First Servant of the World-Phoenix was a prestigious event. Dawn erupted from the wide ceiling shaft, dropping rapidly down through the square to land heavily in front of the transit office. By the time she had been inside and organised departure, Helsveth had arrive more delicately.

Dawn followed the directions of the magical arrow floating front of her, to one of the large spaces allotted for large astral vehicles.

“Have you done a lot of astral travel, Helsveth?” Dawn asked.

“No, First Sister.”

“For the duration of this trip, you many call me Dawn.”

“First Sister...”

Dawn shook her head.

“Let me be more clear,” she said. “For the duration of this trip, you *will* call me Dawn.”

“Yes... Dawn.”

Dawn took out her astral-traversing vessel, which looked like a snow globe without any snow, containing a tiny garden cottage. Dawn tossed it out casually and it rapidly expanded in size as it fell to the floor, stopping just above it to float a few centimetres in the air as it continued to grow. Once the dome and the cottage inside reached full-size, complete with living garden, Dawn stepped forward, gesturing at Helsveth to follow.

Passing though dome felt like stepping through a sheet of water, but Helsveth arrived dry on the other side. The air within the dome was pleasant and fresh, carrying the scent of plants and flowers. She followed Dawn along a stone path through the garden to an outdoor bench, Dawn sat, gesturing for Helsveth to sit beside her.

“What do you think?” Dawn asked, gesturing at the garden around them.

Helsveth wasn't sure what to say. Although her experience with astral travel was limited, almost every astral vessel she had seen was far more grandiose. From giant ships to floating palaces, they had all dwarfed the domed cottage. She didn't want to lie to the First Sister, but did not want to offend her, either.

“It's very humble,” she said.

Dawn laughed easily, completely seeing through the Second Sister. Helsveth was a rather unusual diamond ranker, with a naiveté that most had long-since eliminated. Helsveth was a rare and extraordinary talent, discovered and nurtured at a young age. Reaching diamond-rank before reaching forty years old was not an unrivalled achievement, but it was extraordinary. In the world where she was raised, she spent her life either cloistered away or sent out to fight the monsters, rounded up in their thousands like a game preserve. Her life had been made up of little beyond study and battle, both carefully curated to produce the person she was today.

Dawn liked the remarkable young woman, but recognised that she was in dire need of seasoning. She did not entirely approve of the accelerated program used to advance Helsveth to diamond-rank, but had limited say in the matter. The cult of the World-Phoenix

was neither a military nor a dictatorship, and while the First Servant was ultimately the leader, it did not give her the right to inject herself into matters not directly related to her own duties.

Dawn did not like that all of Helsveth's challenges had been designed, her setbacks and failures engineered. Dawn was of the opinion that only real life could offer the challenges required to grow, not just as an essence user, but as a person. If nothing else, how was the naïve girl meant to handle the political machinations of centuries old diamond rankers?

The answer, of course, was that she wasn't. People wanted a puppet, which infuriated Dawn. Serving the World-Phoenix was a calling, which the old guard cult families seemed to have lost sight of along the way. What they had created in Helsveth, though, was a true believer. Dawn was of a mind to cut the puppet's strings and bring it to life.

Handing over the reins of First Sister, even on a temporary basis, would be throwing the young woman in the deep end. Whether she sank or swam would determine whether Dawn would hand over the mantle permanently, or if she would have to find a new successor. It would take some time to get her ready for that, though. Dawn had an assignment, but it could wait. The outworlder was going home, so how much trouble could he get into in the little time it took her to check on him?

That would make certain people in the cult pushing for Helsveth's ascension to the position unhappy, but unless the World-Phoenix chose to intervene one way or the other, Dawn was ultimately the one to decide. Helsveth would need to prove that she could be more than a puppet before Dawn would accept her. She hoped that Helsveth would manage to prove herself, knowing that, regardless of the people behind her, the earnest young woman's intentions were genuine.

"I've been criticised, from time to time, for my astral vessel," Dawn said. "I've been told it isn't befitting the First Servant of the World-Phoenix, when there is a rather impressive astral palace available to use. Do you think I was right to reject it?"

"I wouldn't presume..."

"Then it's time you did!" Dawn barked, standing back up. She gave Helsveth a sharp glance, disappointed and dismissive. "If you're going to be First Sister, the ultimate responsibility won't be with the rules, the protocols or the traditions. It won't be with the etiquette and it damn well won't be with the people who taught you to be submissive."

She poked Helsveth, who was still sitting with a startled expression, in the chest.

“The First Servant is the last line, the ultimate arbiter before the World-Phoenix itself. They make the final choices and bear the responsibility for them. Do you really think you’re ready for that?”

Without waiting for an answer, Dawn strode off, further down the garden path and around the corner of the cottage. Helsveth was left sitting on the bench staring out ahead of her. The scene of the departure and arrivals square beyond the dome suddenly disappeared. More precisely, the astral vessel disappeared from it, having transitioned out of the physical reality.

The dome was a pocket of physical reality drifting through the deep astral. Beyond its curved boundary, the surreal and ever-shifting panorama ranged from the beautiful to the horrifying to the downright bizarre. There were myriad colours and shapes that surrounded the dome. Rainbow liquid floating in wild, fractal patterns. Scenes that appeared physical in nature, only to scatter like mist in a breeze. Some vistas were nonsense, others startlingly real. It was dream logic made manifest.

Dawn stood by the edge of the dome, watching.

“Fascinating, isn’t it?” she asked, sensing Helsveth’s approach. “The centuries go by, yet I never tire of watching it.”

“You rejected the astral palace because our role is not to glorify ourselves,” Helsveth said. Her voice nervous but had a determined undercurrent as she steeled her courage.

“Our purpose is not even to glorify the World-Phoenix,” she continued. “It is to serve the World-Phoenix. We use glory as we need, but must ultimately remember that we are servants, not masters.”

“That was not what I asked you,” Dawn said, not turning around.

“You asked if it was wrong to reject the astral palace,” Helsveth said, “but the question has a false premise: you did not reject the palace. If using it is the right choice, then you will use it.”

Dawn turned around to face the Second Sister.

“Then tell me why I still use this astral vessel,” she said.

“Because you’re humble. It doesn’t matter what decisions you make, so long as the reasons you make them are sound. That is the responsibility of the First Servant.”

A slight smile made its way onto Dawn’s face.

“Not bad,” she said. “You’ve got a long way to go before you reach adequate, but we might just be able to make something of you yet.”

“As you might imagine,” Dawn explained, “astral navigation is wholly unlike navigation in physical reality.”

The First and Second Sisters were standing side by side, watching the strange visages pass outside the dome.

“Astral geography is to physical geography what a burning passion is to a burning fire,” Dawn explained. “In some ways they are similar, yet at the same time, wholly unrelated.”

“Metaphorical navigation,” Helsveth ventured.

“Conceptual navigation is the widely-used term,” Dawn said. “While you can rely on navigators, it is a good skill to cultivate. Your education was very precise, but you will find, in life, that developing skills you never intended can help you navigate situations you never anticipated.”

“I was taught administration, diplomacy, etiquette,” Helsveth said. “I was also taught to fight.”

“I know,” Dawn said. “I was the one who pushed to have you placed in more and more danger. Every time you made a narrow escape or suffered grievous injury, that was me, pushing at your back.”

“Thank you,” Helsveth said. “I know that I’ve been sheltered. It was only in those moments of true danger that I felt free and alive. Without those moments, I would be languishing at lower rank.”

“Free? Do you resent that we’ve taken charge of your life?” Dawn asked.

“I am powerful enough now that I could leave if I wished,” Helsveth said. “I’ve been given much and have no qualms about returning that grace. Serving the World-Phoenix is a fulfilling life.”

“I agree,” Dawn said, sharing a warm smile. “Things won’t be easy for you while I’m gone. You will ostensibly have my authority, but everyone will know that you’re only a caretaker. The avaricious will push for concessions. Those who raised you will push for power. Those outside the cult will push for influence.”

“All I can do is my best,” Helsveth said. “One way or another, we will learn my worthiness..”

Dawn smiled to herself at the earnest resolve of the Second Sister.

“Do not rush to judge yourself from a single test or a single failure,” Dawn said, “and worthiness is not a set value. No one is asking you be perfect. Actually, they probably are, but you shouldn’t listen to them. If you learn to pick yourself up and learn from your mistakes, you can do no better thing to advance your case.

“Thank you,” Helsveth said. “If I may ask, do you really need to carry out the assignment yourself, or are you taking the chance to test me?”

“The mission is quite real,” Dawn said.

“May I ask about it? Why do you have to go yourself, over one insignificant world in one insignificant reality? Does one, low-ranked man really matter? What makes him so important?”

Dawn gave her a contemplative look, then nodded to herself.

“It’s time you started learning some of the old secrets,” Dawn said. “The key is the two worlds that man has lived on. He belongs to them both now, at a point that is critical for both of them. The worlds themselves aren’t especially important, but what they represent. You are aware that the current Builder replaced the previous one, yes?”

“I am,” Helsveth said.

“The reason that the Builder’s predecessor was sanctioned was that he had corrupted his purpose. The Builder’s role is to create the seeds from which physical realities are born. Our new Builder is oddly dismissive of the task, instead obsessing over creating a reality already developed, whose inhabitants worship him as a god.”

“Will he be sanctioned as well?”

“Probably not. The reason the others accept the Builder’s fascination is that it leaves him performing his actual job with dispassion. This was not the case with the previous incumbent.”

“Oh?” Helsveth prompted.

“The previous Builder became dissatisfied with making seeds that contained nothing but the building blocks of reality. He had no influence, no control. This may be a flaw of the Builder as a role, given that each of the incumbents has had the same issue, but the previous Builder did not satiate those urges with a relatively harmless side project. Instead, he started meddling with the seeds he was creating.”

“Meddling how?”

“He was setting patterns into them, taken from existing worlds, that would cause the universes that expanded from these seeds to develop in predestined ways.”

“And that would work?” Helsveth asked.

“No,” Dawn said. “The Builder had only experimented with two such universe seeds when his actions were discovered, which were but early experiments. The others realised that he was perverting his intrinsic purpose and he was sanctioned, then replaced.”

“Sanctioned? Does that mean killed?”

“I don’t know what it means,” Dawn said. “I don’t think we’re meant to know, but I’m not sure a great astral being can die. I don’t know if that’s even possible.”

“What about the two universes?” Helsveth asked.

“They were early experiments, as I said. The effects were designed to be small, contained enough for the Builder to study as the universes developed. The changes were restricted to two planets, that developed in very similar ways, due to being based on a similar pattern. One was more heavily affected than the other, but the two worlds had much in common.”

“Two planets.”

“One from each universe, but mad echoes of one another by their common origin. Patterns from existing universes, woven together. The basic template was the same for both which is why these worlds echo one another in ways great and small. Those echoes linger to the present, affecting everything from the evolution of the creatures that live on it to the myths formed by their inhabitants. It is also why the more magical world has had a higher proportion of outworlders from the less magical one than from other, low-magic universes.”

“Why was this bad?” Helsveth asked. “Did it cause any harm?”

“The cosmos has mechanisms by which it operates,” Dawn explained. “The greater astral beings are the manifestations of those mechanisms, as well as caretakers, responsible for resolving problems with the mechanisms. They are gods of the cosmos. The previous Builder lost its way, forcing the others to sanction and replace it before it caused a cascading disaster that threw the entire cosmos out of balance.”

“So, the Builder is unlike the other great astral beings, in that he was raised up to take a role, instead of being a manifestation of it.”

“Yes,” Dawn said. “It is why he lacks the reverence for his core task that is the defining trait of the others.”

“But you said they others don’t mind.”

“A detachment from his task of creating world seeds means he will not fall down the same path as his predecessor.”

“But that still left the two worlds influenced by the old Builder.”

“Yes,” Dawn said. “Of the two worlds, one was the result of modest changes. Left alone, it would show no anomalies on its own, live out its existence and ultimately end with the rest of its universe. The second world was a more comprehensive experiment, one that was more volatile. The World-Phoenix was forced to step in and strengthen the

dimensional membrane of this world, restricting the flow of magic from the astral. This was to prevent the abnormalities from manifesting and destabilising the world.”

“That is peripheral to the World-Phoenix’s role, at best,” Helsveth said.

“Yes,” Dawn agreed. “Strictly speaking, she should have let the world destroy itself and then repair the resulting dimensional breach. While she is aloof and above us mortals, however, the World-Phoenix does not lack compassion. She did her best to save that world by strengthening the dimensional membrane. It was an imperfect solution, that now threatens to become unravelled. The new Builder, as part of his personal project, provided knowledge to a deity that was used to create a link between the two worlds, using their similarities as a basis.”

“What kind of link?”

“One that siphons magic from the more magical world to the lesser one, bypassing the dimensional membrane. It does not diminish the normal magical level, but the cyclical magic flood has been increasingly delayed, to the point of now stopping altogether.”

“You’re talking about a monster surge,” Helsveth said.

“Yes,” Dawn confirmed. “The intention is to siphon magic into the other world until a backlash occurs, rebounding through the link to create a far more drastic magical flood than normal. This will weaken the dimensional membrane enough for the Builder to launch an invasion from his own constructed reality.”

“Surely, he cannot be allowed to do that,” Helsveth said.

“Not so long as he uses intermediaries,” Dawn said. “The people of his created world, his cult, even the gods of the world he intends to invade. He pushes the limits, but has avoided crossing any lines. Thus far.”

“What will that do to the less magical world?”

“I’m not sure anyone really knows,” Dawn said. “The Builder disregards it as unimportant; a means to an end. He cares not if his god and mortal agents destroy it. He underestimated how fiercely the World-Phoenix would react, so now he needs it to act and prevent that world’s destruction, lest he be sanctioned like his predecessor.”

“The outworlder.”

“Yes. The World Phoenix cannot act directly and does not maintain branches of her cult on mortal realms. As is her way, she has taken various, more oblique steps to remedy the situation. Of the forces she has set in motion, she has determined the outworlder has proven to have the most potential. It falls to him then, to prevent one, possibly two worlds ultimately being destroyed.”

“That is a lot to place on the shoulders of one man.”

“Yes,” Dawn said. “Hopefully, he can stop getting himself killed.”

“Where is it we are going?” Helsveth asked. She and Dawn were still in the astral vessel, which had been travelling for some time. Dawn had led her into the cottage and brewed them a beverage made from seaweed sourced from her home world.

“You have experienced the presence of the World-Phoenix,” Dawn said. “You have carried a star seed within you for more than half of your life. You have even briefly been a vessel for the World-Phoenix itself, as you will again in the future.”

“The communion was the greatest thrill and honour of my life,” Helsveth said. “I am sorry your time as a vessel is coming to an end.”

The First Servant, in addition to being the head of the cult of the World-Phoenix, was the primary vessel of the great astral being. Unlike the disposable vessels the Builder had used, the diamond-rank vessels of the great astral beings could both withstand the strain of power possessing them and retain their selves after it had left them. Even diamond-rankers had their limits, however, and eventually their souls could no longer withstand the power. This had no lingering effects, so long as they passed on the role of vessel. It even had an effect of strengthening the soul over time, leaving former vessels as peak existences, even among diamond-rankers.

Dawn gave Helsveth a warm smile.

“The communion is a joy,” she said. “What we experience in such cases, though, is but the echo of a grain of sand falling to the ground on the other side of the world. To inhabit the mortal is to be limited by it.”

“The great astral beings cannot show their true magnificence through us,” Helsveth said. This made complete sense to her.

“I suspect it is more than that,” Dawn said. “I suspect that the behaviour of the great astral beings occupying mortal forms is profoundly affected by the vessel they inhabit. They broadly follow their natural direction, but I’ve seen them operating like this enough to conclude that their specific behaviour is heavily shaped by their mortal vessels.”

“What makes you think so?” Helsveth asked.

“The fact that they seem so... mortal. Petty, limited, in a way that I might expect of myself, but not the World-Phoenix, the Reaper or the Celestial Book. Perhaps the Builder, as he began as a mortal.”

“I think I know what you mean,” Helsveth said, brow creased in contemplation. “When I think back to my experience as a vessel, I could sense how much greater the World-

Phoenix was. It's like it needed to use me to operate, but that I somehow tainted it. I clearly felt that I was small and unworthy."

"You will understand better soon," Dawn said. "I am taking you to see the World-Phoenix in person."

Dawn chuckled at Helsveth's wide-eyed shock.

"In person?"

"That's right," Dawn said. "We won't be close, because diamond-rank or not, the power it radiates would annihilate us. It will know we are there, and we will know it."

"What's it like?" Helsveth asked hesitantly.

"I've never encountered a language that could encapsulate it," Dawn said. "You feel like the smallest thing in the cosmos, yet part of something so great and vast that your mind cannot comprehend it. The World Phoenix will communicate with you, but not like you've experienced through the star seed. It isn't some crude mortal means. Imagine experiencing the entire history of the cosmos as a language."

"I don't think I can," Helsveth said.

"Good," Dawn said. "That's exactly the right attitude to go in with."