

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.

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- 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.