

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.

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- 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...”

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- 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].
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“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.

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- 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."

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- 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.

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- 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.

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- 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 offsidiers 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.”