

## Chapter 181:

### Blob Body

Clive performed the next essence ritual for Belinda.

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- You have absorbed [Adept Essence]. You have absorbed 3 of 4 essences.
  - Progress to iron rank: 75% (3/4 essences).
  - [Adept Essence] has bonded to your [Speed] attribute, changing your [Speed] from normal to [Iron 0]. Master all adept essence abilities to increase your [Speed] attribute.
  - You have awakened the adept essence ability [Blessing of Readiness]. You have awakened 1 of 5 adept essence abilities.

Ability: [Blessing of Readiness] (Adept)

- Spell (recovery).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: Varies.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): This spell can only affect an ally and not yourself. The cooldown of the next ability used by the target is reduced by up to one minute. The cooldown of this ability is equal to the time taken from the cooldown of the target ability.

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“Being able to use a key ability twice in quick succession could be very domineering,” Humphrey said. “That’s a strong power.”

Now used to it, they waited for the blue-grey light signalling a racial gift evolution.

- 
- Human racial ability [Essence Gift] has evolved to [Quick Learner].

Ability: [Quick Learner]

- Transfigured from [Human] ability [Essence Gift].
- You may use skill books for which you meet the requirements.

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“Oh, no.” Belinda said as her shoulders slumped.

“Great,” Sophie said. “You can finally start learning some of those skills you missed out on.”

“I didn’t miss out, Sophie. I don’t want to learn how to kick people.”

“You’re an adventurer, now.”

“And I intend to stand at the back,” Belinda said. “Look at the power I just got. It’s literally designed to have someone else do the kicking.”

“It never hurts to have some combat skills to fall back on,” Humphrey said.

“Adventurers who assume everything will go the way they want die very quickly.”

“A skill book doesn’t take long to use,” Jason said. “It’s kind of the whole point. It doesn’t have to be fighting. You could really expand your magical knowledge.”

“She already has magical knowledge,” Sophie said. “What she needs is combat skills, and we just so happened to get some rather good ones. Obviously she needs to train to make sure she absorbs all that knowledge properly,” Sophie said. “Asano, you said Rufus Remore can supply training like that, right?”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “He trained me that way.”

“He did?” Sophie asked, casting a sceptical eye over Jason. “I suppose he did what he could with what he had.”

“Oh, nice,” Jason said with exaggerated offence as the rest of the team laughed.

They had only been speaking a few moments when an ephemeral cube floated out of Belinda’s chest, followed by a second and a third. They hovered in front of her, spiralling around one another until they came together to merge into a single cube. It swirled with muted colours that formed ghostly shapes that were almost recognisable before fading into the background again.

“That’s your confluence essence,” Clive said with reverence.

“What do I do?” Belinda asked.

“Reach out and take it,” Clive said.

Hesitantly, Belinda reached out and touched the awakening stone. It dissolved into smoke that writhed around her before sinking into her body.

- 
- You have absorbed [Charlatan Essence]. You have absorbed 4 of 4 essences.
  - Progress to iron rank: 100% (4/4 essences).
  
  - [Charlatan Essence] has bonded to your [Recovery] attribute, changing your [Recovery] from normal to [Iron 0]. Master all charlatan essence abilities to increase your [Recovery] attribute.
  
  - You have awakened the charlatan essence ability [Echo Spirit]. You have awakened 1 of 5 charlatan essence abilities.

Ability: [Echo Spirit] (Charlatan)

- Familiar (ritual).
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: None.
  
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)
  
- Effect (iron): Summon an [Echo Spirit] to serve as a familiar.

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“A familiar power,” Clive said. “You know, rather than wait until we get back from this shopping trip, we might want to rent one of the local Magic Society’s ritual rooms, wherever we end up, and do the rest of Lindy’s stones. If she has any more familiars, we’ll need to know the summoning materials while we’re still somewhere we can buy them.”

“That’s a good point,” Jason said. “I’m sure we can figure it out.”

The blue-grey light started emitting from Belinda on cue.

- 
- Human racial ability [Essence Gift] has evolved to [Face in the Crowd].

Ability: [Face in the Crowd]

- Transfigured from [Human] ability [Essence Gift].
  
- Take on the form of another race. You may mimic a specific member of that race or otherwise alter your appearance within the parameters of the race’s natural features. Your aura blends into any surrounding auras, becoming difficult to detect, even with higher rank aura senses. You do not gain any abilities of that race.

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“Shape-shifting,” Clive said. “Not a surprise. The charlatan essence is known for shape-shifting and illusion. Most prefer other options, however. Something that combines deception with attack powers for a more classic assassin power set. Oh, an extra one! Here we go.”

Belinda had lit up with blue grey light again as Clive was talking.

- 
- Human racial ability [Special Attack Affinity] has evolved to [Form and Function].

Ability: [Form and Function]

- Transfigured from [Human] ability [Special Attack Affinity].
- When you take on the form of another race, gain some of their racial abilities in addition to your own. Your aura will match that of a member of the race you are mimicking.

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“You lost the special attack bonus of humans,” Neil said.

“Good,” Belinda said. “I think I’ve made my stance on standing up the front and punching things quite clear. So, is that it?”

“Not quite,” Clive said.

“I put some fresh clothes in the washroom,” Sophie said. “Asano even donated a bottle of crystal wash.”

“Oh, right,” Belinda said and made a beeline for the adjacent washroom. Halfway there she started to look very queasy. Sophie caught up and led her through the door.

- 
- You have absorbed 4/4 essences.
  - All your attributes have reached iron rank.
  - You have reached iron rank.
  - You have gained damage reduction against normal-rank damage sources.
  - You have gained increased resistance to normal-rank effects.
  - You have gained the ability to sense auras.
  - You have gained the ability to sustain yourself using sources of concentrated magic.

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The rest of the team stood around awkwardly, all having been through the unpleasantness Belinda was experiencing in the next room. The purging of the body’s impurities was as disgusting an experience as adventurers went through. It was all the worse for the source of the offending filth being their own bodies.

“So, what does a body actually change into as it goes up ranks?” Jason asked. “Is it just magically-reinforced versions of the stuff we all have now?”

“No, and that’s actually quite interesting,” Clive said. “The higher the rank an Adventurer reaches, the more their body becomes like yours Jason; a physical manifestation of pure magic. The physical material that makes up their body is refined and replaced. Obviously, a high-ranker’s body is much better than yours.”

“My body? You mean an outworlder body?”

“I do.”

“But that’s just a monster body with a soul in it.”

“Yes,” Clive said. “Right now, all of us except you have the usual internal workings of our respective species. But you, Jason, are essentially an undifferentiated mass of biological tissue. You have a skeleton to hang it all on, enough muscle to get the job done and skin to hold it all in. A few extras, like hair and eyeballs. Blood, to keep the whole mess operating. Where we have things like lungs, a heart and such, You’re just a mass of extra flesh and blood your body can deploy as necessary.”

“What?” Jason asked in horror.

“It gives you an advantage over the rest of us,” Clive said enviously. “No spleen to burst, no lungs to puncture. No heart to stab.”

“Wait,” Jason said. “You’re saying I’m just a generic lump of biomass?”

“Yes,” Clive said. “We’ll all get there, eventually, but you’ve got that head start on us.”

“But I breathe,” Jason said. “I have a heartbeat.”

“Habit,” Clive said.

“Habit?”

“Essentially, your body is faking it. You don’t have a heart or lungs.”

“So, I could just go underwater and never drown?”

“Yes,” Clive said. “In fact, I’d recommend it. Fighting through that drowning reflex is a great way to break the breathing habit.”

“That sounds horrifying,” Jason said. “What happens when I eat?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t take any food out,” Clive said. “It would get all soggy.”

“Not when I’m trying to drown myself,” Jason said. “I mean, what happens to the food that I shove into my body?”

“The mass of flesh and blood inside you consumes it for energy with complete efficiency,” Clive said. “Strictly speaking, it wouldn’t even need to go in your mouth.”

This time everyone gave Clive horrified looks.

“What?” he asked. “It’s true.”

“Hold on,” Jason said, thinking of something else and desperately wanting to change the subject. “Emir told me that my body was formed using an imprint of my soul.”

“That’s broadly accurate,” Clive said.

“My body wasn’t a blob mass when I left my world. Why would my soul make a blob body?”

“Do you really think your soul travelled between worlds without being changed?” Clive asked. “A normal rank soul?”

"I suppose not," Jason said.

"Thadwick was actually interested in all this," Neil said.

"Really?" Humphrey asked. "I've known him since we were kids and I've never so much as seen him with a book."

"He had the theory he formulated for himself," Neil said. "Once he found out that healing fixes the differences between the soul and the body, he got it into his head that if constantly thought about... certain parts of himself being larger, all the time, it would imprint on his soul. Then, healing magic would actually make it happen."

After staring at Neil in disbelief, they all started laughing.

"Let me get this straight," Jason said between peals of laughter. "Thadwick spends all his time wandering around thinking about having a trouser zucchini?"

"That explains so much," Humphrey said.

"I know, right?" Jason agreed.

They stopped laughing as the washroom door opened and Sophie emerged.

"It wasn't too bad," she said. "Lindy will be out in a bit."

Sophie looked at the frozen expressions on her four male teammates.

"What were you all talking about before I came out here?"

"Nothing," Clive said, the others nodding their agreement.

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"Everyone will be leaving for Greenstone tomorrow," Emir said. "Well, aside from my staff members who still have an underwater town to pore over. The scythe was the chief objective for my client, but the more information we dig up, the bigger the bonus."

"Wexler has been hiding from your historian," Jason said. "She been chasing her all over the cloud palace."

Jason had joined Emir in his domed office for afternoon tea, at Emir's request.

"The revelation of a random street thief knowing the lost martial art of an ancient order of assassins poses certain interesting questions."

"You and your historian can take that up with Wexler," Jason said. "I'm having nothing to do with it."

"No," Emir said, his penetrating gaze matched by a subtle aura pressure. "I have to imagine the man who triumphed over all others in the Reaper trials gleaned at least a few tasty truth nuggets."

Jason didn't try and push back the gold rank aura, letting it wash over him and giving Emir an indulgent smile. Emir chuckled, letting off the pressure.

“Speaking of tasty nuggets,” Emir said, “My people have been putting together something of a feast for the evening, with some of the various participating luminaries invited. I was hoping our illustrious victor could be convinced to play host.”

“I’m not sure about that,” Jason said. “I don’t always get along with aristocracy. They think the right to deference is something you inherit, like a cupboard from your grandmother that smells like a cat died in a lavender field about thirty years ago.”

“Well, that’s a very specific stance, if nothing else. To be honest, I’m looking for a way around the kind of etiquette clash such a disparate array of nobles always seems to invite. Everyone is clamouring to meet the man who bested all their very well trained and resourced children, and if you’re the host, then you set the rules. And of course, there’s no rank at an Asano barbecue, is there?”

“No there isn’t,” Jason said with a chuckle. “Will that even work, though?”

“Probably not,” Emir said. “But if they’re forewarned about the expected etiquette, then their participation is a tacit agreement to the host’s established rules, even if the host is a little unconventional. I’ll tell them the dress code is extreme casual.”

“So, they have to agree to Asano barbecue rules or not show up,” Jason said. “Not bad.”

“Do try and be diplomatic about it,” Emir said.

“I’ll do my best,” Jason said. “Fair warning, though: my best isn’t great. But who knows how many favours I owe you at this point, so count me in.”

“A rather odd young man once told me that friends don’t count favours.”

“He sounds wise beyond his years. And dashingly handsome.”

Emir chuckled, shaking his head.

“I’ll have Hester portal you out for your shopping trip in the morning,” Emir said. “She suggested leaving you in her home town, which is, in fact a huge city. You can spend a few days there, while she takes the chance to visit family. She can portal you directly back to Greenstone, after.”

“What kind of range does she have on that?” Jason asked.

“She may still be silver,” Emir said, “but her portal ability has hit gold rank. She can go anywhere in the world she’s visited before.”

“Nice.”

“You may want to spend the afternoon liaising with my staff, then,” Emir said. “Stick with Constance and she’ll have you ready for hosting duties in no time.”

## Chapter 182: Particular Appetites

In the old stone fortress in Old City, now a neutral ground of criminal delights, one of Cole Silva's thugs knocked on the door of Silva's office.

"Enter," came a gruff bark from inside. The thug went in, his body screaming reluctance.

"Boss?"

"What?"

"You asked for any news about Wexler."

"And?"

"She was part of the team that brought back the thing that big-time out-of-towner was after. I don't think we'll ever have a shot at her, boss."

A short time later, two more thugs dragged the body out of the office as Silva strode back and forth, fuming.

"You want us to send someone to clean up the blood, boss?"

"No," Silva snarled, then stopped his pacing. "Find Killian Laurent and have him come see me."

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Emir had not entirely thrown out the usual decorum of a high society soiree, with one of his staff announcing each of the prestigious guests as they arrived. The guests were then met by Constance, at her most proper, and Jason, considerably less so.

"It didn't occur to you to wear long pants?" Constance asked him quietly between arrivals.

"Nah," Jason said.

Zara Rimaros was the next to arrive, flanked by her two offsidiers and accompanied by an older woman. Zara's companion was another celestine with the same caramel skin set off by sapphire eyes and hair. She looked around thirty but Jason had come to recognise the agelessness of essence users, even if her politely retracted but unmistakably silver-rank aura hadn't given it away. There was something behind the eyes of high-rankers; something about the way they carried themselves. An absolute confidence that low-rankers, even amongst the nobility, were yet to develop. This woman was practically bursting with it.

"Jason," Zara greeted with a smile full of dangerous promise. "Might I introduce my aunt, Vesper Rimaros."



“A genuine pleasure,” Jason greeted, his respectful tone wholly incongruous with his short pants, floral print shirt and open-toe sandals.

“I’ve heard much about you,” Vesper greeted, apparently unfazed by Jason’s outfit.

“Oh,” Jason winced. “Don’t worry, we got all the heidels back, and most of them weren’t too traumatised. We’re completely out of fruit chutney after all that, though, so let me save you the trouble of checking the condiments table.”

“What are you talking about?” Vesper asked, whose eyebrows had slowly climbed up above her otherwise schooled expression. Jason’s expression was suddenly that of a man realising he’d said too much.

“Uh... nothing,” he said, looking about nervously. “You should say hello to Emir. He’s around here, somewhere.”

Zara, hid a giggle behind her hand, flashing her eyes at Jason.

“Emir Bahadir is currently a person of interest to our royal family over a theft that took place several years ago,” Zara told him, her words formal but her voice unable to excise the undertone of mirth.

“And he still invited you?” Jason asked. “What a magnanimous bloke.”

“You know, Jason,” Zara said. “At the risk of self-aggrandisement, I like to think that when someone meets me, I’m the most interesting person they meet that day. I’m not used to being upstaged by gods.”

“Never fear,” Jason said. “You were absolutely the most interesting person I met that day. I’m pretty sure gods are just big lumps of magic that have been around so long they gained sentience and started having funny ideas.”

“That comes dangerously close to blasphemy,” Zara’s aunt said.

“Blasphemy is kind of my thing,” Jason said.

“And yet, you were just personally and publicly praised by multiple gods,” Zara said.

“I know, right?” Jason asked. “It’s a funny old world.”

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Danielle Geller came upon Rick Geller, standing alone. He was only a distant relative, to the point she wasn’t sure what their actual relation was. Some kind of much-removed nephew, from what she recalled. She had come to admire and respect the young man who had been as close to the family’s recent tragedies as anyone, losing two members of his team who were closely related. Rather than swear vengeance, he had grown into his responsibilities as a leader. Instead of dwelling on those who had fallen, he focused on protecting those that remained.

She noticed his gaze locked on something across the room. She followed it to where Jason was speaking quietly with the Rimaros princess and her royal aunt. Danielle noted the body language of the princess and the confused expression on Vesper Rimaros' face she had come to associate with people talking to Jason.

"That's the hurricane princess," Rick said.

Danielle sighed.

"I don't understand people who insist on these overblown sobriquets," Danielle said. "She's iron-rank, for goodness sake. None of you have had a chance to truly prove yourselves."

They watched Zara giggle at something Jason said, putting a hand over her mouth.

"How does he do that?" Rick asked and Danielle looked at him.

"No offence, dear boy, but a woman like that would chew you up and spit you out. I thought you were interested in one of the young ladies on your team?"

"Yes," Rick said. Normally he wouldn't admit it, but no one who had been through Geller training would consider lying to Danielle.

"I could use some of Jason's way with women," Rick said wistfully. "Really, how does he do that?"

"Did you ask him?"

"He said that what he had can't be taught."

Danielle chuckled.

"Probably true," she said. "Would you like me to tell you why?"

"Yes," Rick said enthusiastically, turning to look at Danielle.

"When it comes to princesses or other highborn women, do you know how often they meet someone who doesn't care they're a princess? Never, probably, at least in their own age group. The smarter boys learn the value of pretending they don't care, which makes the smarter young women very good at spotting it. All the more, for the social training they undergo. Then along comes Jason, who genuinely doesn't care who their family is. Add a little wit, a disregard for propriety and a penchant for the taboo and you're waving fresh meat in front of a hungry animal."

"I don't think I can be as brazen as Jason," Rick said.

"Nor should you be," Danielle said. "Jason is who he is, without apology or shame. He accepts the consequences, knowing that as many or more will hate him for it as be drawn to him. People respect authenticity, however, even when it's as unusual as Jason's. There's an integrity to it. That's what you are looking for. You don't need to be like Jason. You need to figure out who you are, Rickard. Be true to that and accept the

consequences. Then you won't have to go looking for the right people because you'll have already learned to recognise them."

"You really think it's that simple?" Rick asked.

"I do," Danielle said. "Simple, however, is not the same thing as easy."

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Jason was still greeting new arrivals, the steady presence of Constance a guiding light. She would subtly indicate a guest who would not respond well to Jason's particular social graces and he affected enough civility that no one made a fuss, in spite of his, to their eyes, ludicrous appearance.

Various groups had arrived from various religious organisations, many of whom were at a loss as to how to handle Jason. One such group was from the church of knowledge.

"Gabrielle," Jason greeted. "I didn't realise you were participating in the trials."

"My lady felt that I would benefit from facing challenges where I did not have her to rely upon."

"Yeah, the Healer mentioned that the gods couldn't access astral spaces. It's always fun to hear that even gods have their limits."

Behind him, Constance pointedly cleared her throat.

"My lady has prepared another gift for you," Gabrielle said, clearly unhappy to be delivering the message. "She believes you will find it more palatable than the last. It shall be delivered on your return to Greenstone."

"I'm a little wary, after the last one," Jason said.

"She is certain that this one will be more welcome."

"I guess we'll see," Jason said.

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Hester was one of Emir's most important staff members. She was in charge of logistics and coordination between all of Emir's disparate operations, for which her portal ability was a crucial tool.

Hester was from Pranay, this world's equivalent of Sri Lanka. In this world, however, it was a much larger, located further to the south and west. In a world where the Arabian Peninsula did not exist and the Mediterranean connected directly to the Indian Ocean, it's northern coast was home to several important connections for sea trade.

Hester had been born in one of those ports, the city of Jayapura. She opened a portal through which Jason and his team stepped into. They emerged from the portal with mixed reactions to the transition. Jason and Sophie, with their astral affinities were unaffected.

They immediately started taking in their surroundings, including their team members who handled the transition less well.

Humphrey had a teleport power of his own, so while not immune to the disorientation, was at least used to it. Portalling across a continent was more straining than across a room, but he took a deep breath and was fine. Clive and Neil were less experienced but it was not their first time, staggering a little before righting themselves. Belinda had the worst of it, lurching dizzily until Sophie stepped in to prevent her from falling over entirely. Stash the puppy stumbled about before toppling over and letting out an unhappy whine.

They were in a courtyard full of lush plants, in raised planters and hanging from walls. The walls, planters and even the floor were covered in mosaic tiles in bright, cool colours. The shades of blue, green and turquoise gave the courtyard an underwater feeling, the vibrant space lit up by the bright sunlight. The air was hot, like that in Greenstone but drier, without the mugginess produced from the delta. The heat was cut by a fresh breeze with a tang of the sea, blowing in through archways leading out of the courtyard.

Hester gave them a tour of what turned out to be a magnificent house on a clifftop, overlooking the ocean. Tunnels dug down into the rock, with stone stairwells leading down into a network of cave grottos. Platforms of metal and wood wound through the caves, suspended over the water below. Magic glow stones lit up the caves, both under the water and above.

“There are guest rooms down here or up above,” Hester told them. “You can choose whichever you prefer.”

“Down here,” Jason said immediately, grinning like a loon as he looked over a railing and into the water.

“If you want to swim, feel free,” Hester said, continuing to lead them through the colourfully-lit caves. “The main entertaining grotto actually has a bar you can only get to by swimming. Or flying, water-walking, teleporting. Whatever powers you might have.”

“You have a magnificent home,” Jason said as Hester led them back upstairs.

“You can travel a lot as an adventurer,” Hester told him, “especially with a power like mine. I think it’s important to have somewhere to come home to, though. And, of course, being adventurers gives us the means to have that.”

Hester introduced them to her extended family, all of whom lived in the expansive compound sprawling over the top of the cliff. Like many successful adventurers, she had provided her family with essences and monster cores to extend their longevity, even if they never fought a monster themselves. Hester’s family were extremely welcoming, especially Hester’s mother, Anise.

“She never brings home friends,” Anise was saying to Jason as they walked, joining them for the rest of the tour.

“Mother...”

“Oh, hush dear. You really must tell me what Hester has been up to, Jason. She’s always so secretive.”

“Let me think,” Jason said. “Ah, I know. A little while ago, there was a big expedition that went out from the city where we’ve been staying. It was a huge deal, and they sent along everyone who could open a portal or do a mass teleport. Of course, then they ended up in an astral space they couldn’t portal out of. Are you familiar with astral spaces, Anise?”

“Oh, yes,” Anise said. “So many rumours going around these days about them.”

“Well, it turned out that expedition was in desperate need of help, and it was Hester who made that happen. Without her, no one would have gotten there in time.”

“Why aren’t you the one to tell me about these things?” Anise asked Hester.

“I didn’t really do anything,” Hester said.

“Nonsense,” Jason said. “She’s an absolute hero. Humphrey and Neil, here, were on that expedition. They might not be here if it weren’t for your daughter.”

“He’s blowing things out of proportion,” Hester said.

They came to a pathway outside the house from which they could see the city sprawling down from the hilltop upon which the Hesters’ home was located. It was much larger than Greenstone, spreading out over the coastline, alongside the cerulean ocean sparkling in the sunlight.

“This is beautiful,” Jason said as they stopped to look out. “Thank you for sharing your home with us, Hester.”

“I’m just happy you managed to bring that scythe back,” Hester said. “Emir seems like a relaxed boss, but he wasn’t great to be around while you were in the astral space. The prospect of no one bringing it back after two years of effort? The whole staff is just about ready to kiss you. Don’t let them, though. Especially Weird Pants Keith.”

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Killian Laurent was an elf who looked like the villain from a fairy story, with ugly, sunken features, emaciated limbs and sickly pallid skin. Dressed in ill-fitted black, even the way he walked had an unpleasant, obsequiousness to it. He sidled into Silva’s office, not even glancing at the blood soaking into the rug. Silva stood with his back to the door, not turning around at Killian’s entrance.

“You once made a suggestion to me,” Silva said without preamble. “I declined.”

“You did not want to take the risk of discovery,” Killian said in his raspy voice.

“Since then, I have been discretely approached,” Silva said. “Someone offered assistance that may make something like what you suggested more viable.”

“You are ready to take the girl?”

“No,” Silva said. “I was offered assistance in taking the man who took her from me. She’ll get hers when the man who holds her indenture contract is flushed out to sea in a thousand pieces. Is this something you can make happen?”

“Mr Silva, I am a man of particular appetites,” Killian said. “I moved my loyalties from your father to you, because you have my appetites met reliably and discreetly, where your father would not. People of my inclination operate in very small circles, and I am familiar with a man, a silver-rank adventurer, with predilections not unlike my own. There is no way such a man, being silver-rank, would enter your employ. But if he were offered the same arrangement I enjoy, I imagine he would be willing to undertake the occasional favour. For example, the quiet acquisition of a troublesome young adventurer.”

“How reliable is this man?”

“I can assure you, Mr Silva, that he is a man of exquisite caution.”

Silva did not respond for a long time, still staring at the wall without turning to face Killian.

“Very well,” Silva said. “Set up a meeting; I want to talk to this man. Also, find out exactly what he will want before the meeting happens.”

## Chapter 183: Domineering, Territorial and Robust

For those who could afford them, personal transport in Jayapura consisted of small discs that floated in the air, underfoot, the rider directing them by shifting their weight. Hester brought a number of them out onto an open area of lawn for the visitors to get a handle on.

“Hoverboards!” Jason called out cheerfully.

“Their actually called personal float discs,” Clive corrected him.

“Hoverboards!”

“That’s not..”

“Hoverboards!” Jason asserted again. Stash turned into a bird and flew onto Jason’s head, echoing his cry.

“Hoverboards!”

“Good boy,” Jason said, giving bird Stash a biscuit.

Smaller float discs, like those Hester had brought out, were for standing on. She explained that there were larger ones, each of which had a seat on them. Use of those by anyone other than the physically infirm were looked down on, however.

Humphrey and Clive had used them before, while Sophie and Jason found their balance quickly. Neil and Belinda had more trouble, struggling to get their disc to move, only for it to shoot out from under them as it did. While they continued to practice, Jason skimmed around the edges of the yard, giggling like a madman.

“Hoverboards,” he said happily, pulling up next to Clive. “Why do we not have these in Greenstone?”

“The magical density is too low,” Clive said. “It’s why all the magical vehicles need someone like me to drive them.”

“Doesn’t that make your ability kind of useless here?” Jason asked at which Clive grinned.

“You need someone like me to drive that,” Clive said, pointing up. Jason looked into the air, where what looked like a zeppelin was floating gracefully through the sky. Instead of an inflated envelope of air, it had what looked like the frame of one, visibly glowing with magic.

“Awesome,” Jason said.

Eventually Hester judged Neil and Belinda ready for strictly supervised use of the float discs and they started down the hill and into the city, carefully for the benefit of Belinda and Neil.

“Did we have to start off downhill?” Neil asked as he nervously controlled his disc.

“Not to say I don’t agree with the sentiment,” Belinda said, likewise moving with caution. “It might be a bit much to ask Hester to move her house somewhere flatter for our benefit.”

Hester led them into the city, passing through older and older sections as they moved closer to the centre. Their destination was the Mystic Quarter, where the city’s main temples were located, along with the Magic and Adventure Society campuses.

“The Adventure Society trade hall should be the place to find most of what you’re after,” Hester told them. “You may need the Magic Society for some of the ritual components. In any case, the trade hall brokers will take all the loot you’d care to trade off your hands.”

Adventure Society campus dwarfed that of Greenstone’s, although it lacked the open simplicity. Instead, it was a warren of tight alleys and narrow streets, with building hugging together like goods bundled in a crate. It was more like a town, with the trade hall alone being the size of a village.

“You should enjoy this, Humphrey,” Jason said as they moved through the crowds of the main trade hall. “Unlike in Greenstone, there’s no one to recognise you. You can just be some guy, here.”

After visiting the brokers, they spent some time shopping around, Jason’s group chat allowing them to stay in contact when they split up. They moved through the crowded trade hall, the maelstrom of voices all around them, hawking and haggling.

“Does anyone have any crystal wash?” they heard a voice calling out. “Everywhere seems to be sold out, all of a sudden.”

The team regroup outside the trade hall to compare purchases. They had only bought a few things, their main purpose being to hand over their awakening stones and essences to the brokers for auction. There was market enough that auctions took place daily, so they would be able to collect their earnings in the morning.

“I got a line on a magical tattooist with the skills I need,” Jason said. “Someone who can apply the immortal crest.”

The immortal crest was an item Jason obtained during the trials that was unusual in nature. Using it required the services of a specialist magic craftsperson, none of whom resided in Greenstone. Humphrey had used one himself, while travelling with his mother.



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Item: [Immortal Crest] (iron rank, rare)

*An object that allows the soul to mark the body (consumable, tattoo).*

- **Effect:** When applied by a mystical tattooist, this item will draw out a soul crest. This item can only be used on an iron rank essence user.

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After acquiring the item, Jason had asked Clive about it. Clive, in turn, roped in Humphrey, who already had a soul crest. A soul crest, they explained, was a magical tattoo printed not on the body, but on the soul. That imprint would appear on the body in turn, in a form that resisted design. The form of the crest was a visible reflection of the bearer's true nature.

The value of the crest was as a form of identification. The unique imprint on the aura remained the same, even if the aura itself changed and the visible form of the crest with it. Impossible to track or falsify through even the strongest magic, so long as there was a record of the imprint, it was a guaranteed proof of identity.

Immortal crests were difficult and expensive to make, especially for an iron-rank item, but many wealthy adventurers commissioned one, nonetheless. Once the Adventure Society had a record of the imprint, it was an ironclad proof of identity that could be verified at any branch in the world.

The visible form of the crest could not be chosen, instead reflecting the soul that produced it. This had famously mixed results.

"If we're going to see a magical tattooist," Humphrey said, "then you should all get one. I already did, when I used my immortal crest."

Deciding to make that their next stop, Clive explained magical tattoos as they traversed the city on their hover-discs.

"It will only last as long as your current rank," Clive told them. "It gets purged from your body as you rank up, along with any other magical waste that doesn't hold up to your new rank. That leaves you free to get a new tattoo at your new rank."

"What do they do?" Belinda asked. "I've heard of magic tattoos, but never seen one."

"We can change that," Humphrey said. He pulled back his sleeve to show an intricate sigil on his upper arm, confident enough in his skill with the floating disc to do so without falling off. The tattoo's colour was a brilliant shade of blue that shimmered like sunlight on the ocean.

"Different tattoos do different things," Clive said. "That looks like a mana-accumulating one."

“That’s right,” Humphrey said. “It slowly accumulates mana, which I can absorb when I need it. It’s basically a mana potion that takes a few hours to refill itself.”

“The functions of iron-rank tattoos are quite basic,” Clive explained, “so most people go for some variant on health or mana recovery, be that a moderate increase to natural recovery, or an on-demand burst like Humphrey has there. There are other options, though. A short burst of damage reduction, or reducing the cooldown of an ability. Effects like that are single-use and take an amount of time to recover before being used again.”

“How many can you get?” Sophie asked.

“Just the one,” Clive said. “Usually, anyway. There are essence abilities that can increase that. My rune essence, for example, will frequently produce that type of ability. I didn’t get one of those, though.”

Following the directions Jason had obtained, Hester guided them away from the main areas of the Mystic Quarter, the streets growing narrower and the building older as they went.

“Are you sure this place we’re going is legitimate?” Neil asked Jason.

“Are you kidding?” Jason asked. “Mysterious shopkeepers in dilapidated parts of the city where most would never tread are always better.”

“According to whom?” Neil asked.

“Eighties movies.”

“Eighty what?”

“I’ll assess the place for myself,” Hester said.

They found the tattoo shop, and while the dingy exterior was not confidence-inducing, the interior was a stark contrast, with polished wood, shining tiles and glass as pristine as a cloudless winter sky. Hung on the walls were pictures of various tattoos, some artistic, others with descriptions of their effects.

“If the craftsmanship we can expect is a match for what’s on display here,” Clive said, examining the pictures, “then I don’t foresee any problems.”

“Agreed,” Hester said, likewise looking over the displays. She turned to Jason.

“Who told you about this place?” she asked.

“I was asking around at the trade hall,” Jason said. “I couldn’t much tell good advice from the bad, so I tried something else. They don’t differentiate the trade hall by rank like they do back in Greenstone; it’s all mixed together. So I started looking for places that seemed a bit less impressive than you’d expect at the trade hall. Eventually I found a place that didn’t look like much and everyone seemed to ignore, but every person I saw go in was clearly a top-flight adventurer. It was all silver and gold rankers, the kind who have

plain-looking gear that you can tell is actually the good stuff if you pay attention. So, I went in, had a little chat with the guy running it and he gave me a tip.”

“Just like that?” Sophie asked.

“Well... I did have to promise to send Neil in for a special visit.”

“What?” Neil asked.

“It’ll be fine,” Jason said. They really liked the sound of a chunky elf. We should start looking for a sailor suit soon, though, because finding one in your size might be tricky.”

“They?”

“I think he had some mates he wanted to bring along. The more, the merrier, right?”

“You know that someone is going to tie you to a boulder and drop you in the ocean one day,” Neil said.

“That’s fine,” Jason said. “It turns out that I don’t need to breathe.”

A wiry woman emerged from a back room. She looked older, but hale and weathered like a tree that survived storm after storm. Jason was unable to detect any aura from her at all.

“I was wondering who was making a commotion in my shop,” she said, looking them over. “Not a lot of boisterous youths darken my door. Accompanied by Hester Maharala, no less. The lady with the house on the hill. Are you still following that Bahadir boy around?”

“You know Emir?” Hester asked.

“Know might be a strong word,” the woman said. “We crossed paths when he was still a precocious boy. Good to hear he took up treasure hunting, because he was only a so-so adventurer. That couple he ran around with, now they knew their business. The sneaky one, too.”

“Gabriel and Arabella Remore,” Jason said. “We’ll be seeing them soon, if you’d like us to pass on a greeting.”

“Oh, they don’t want to hear from some old shopkeeper,” she said. “Who is it that sent you my way?”

“The man selling magic lamps in the trade hall,” Jason said.

“And you were the one who got it out of him?” she asked. “He probably saw you were an outworlder and got all excitable, the damn coot.”

“I’m Jason Asano. May I have your name?”

“Tilly is good enough. You didn’t come here just for tattoos, Jason Asano. You could get them plenty of places, cheaper and easier.”

Jason took out a plain metal plate and handed it over.

“Immortal crest,” Tilly said, turning it over in her hands. “Who made this?”

“Me, kind of,” Jason said. “A looting ability. Of sorts.”

“Of weird sorts, to produce something like this. Alright, I can get you sorted out. Once we’ve settled the matter of price.”

“And that is?” Jason asked

“Is the chunky elf with the sailor suit on the table?”

Jason blinked in surprise, then burst out laughing.

“Gods damn you, Asano,” Neil said.

“The price is money, of course,” Tilly said with a twinkle in her eye. “It’s a tattoo shop. It’ll be a wheelbarrow full of coins for an immortal crest and a day or two to get things ready.”

“Once today’s auctions have gone through, we’ll have wheelbarrows of cash to spare,” Jason said. “In the meantime, We’ll get some enchanted tattoos.”

Tilly took them back into a workroom with a big chair, plus needles and pots of oils, unguents and powders. Light came from the large skylight over their heads.

“You first,” Tilly said to Humphrey. “Shirt off.”

“I already have a tattoo,” Humphrey said.

“I don’t care,” she said. “I want a look at that soul crest. The price of me doing one for your friend.”

Humphrey tugged off his shirt, revealing his impressive physique.

“Damn, Humphrey,” Jason said. “I didn’t realise you waxed your chest.”

“I don’t wax my chest.”

“You do seem oddly hairless,” Belinda said. “Do you get that hair-removal cream from Jory?”

“No!”

“I think he has some kind of magic crystal he uses for shaving,” Jason said.

“Would you please stop talking about my chest hair.”

“You don’t have any chest hair,” Belinda said. “That’s kind of the whole point.”

“Stop gabbing and turn around,” Tilly told Humphrey, who was clearly relieved to do so. It revealed a startling image on Humphrey’s back; a rainbow-coloured dragon on a great, sand-coloured shield. The dragon’s scales glimmered in the light, making it seem like a living thing.”

“Whoever drew this out knew their business,” Tilly assessed. “This is the Vitesse style. Was it Klimpsen?”

“You can tell that just from looking at it?” Humphrey asked. “I though the image was determined by the soul.”

“It is,” Tilly said. “It’s shaped by the artist that drew it out of your soul, though. Klimpfen was a good choice but he doesn’t work for just anyone. You must have some good family connections.”

“His mum is kind of a big deal,” Jason said.

“Lucky for some,” Tilly said. “You next, Asano. I need to know what I’m dealing with to make the right preparations. Shirt off.”

Jason looked at Humphrey as he self-consciously removed his shirt. Jason’s body was as fit as it had ever been but looked flabby and meagre next to Humphrey.

“How is that fair,” Jason said. “You look like some famous sculpture brought to life by a witch to steal my girlfriend.”

“You don’t have a girlfriend,” Humphrey said.

“Rub it in, why don’t you.”

Tilly shoved Jason around and started prodding at his back with her wizened fingers.

“You shouldn’t get anything too embarrassing as a crest. You wouldn’t believe the number of sheltered young idiots that get an immortal crest and aren’t happy with a crest that reveals who they truly are. Which yours will too, make no mistake. If you don’t think you can handle seeing what you really are, then I’d stop here.”

“It is what it is,” Jason said. “Worst case, shirts are a thing.”

“Interesting aura,” Tilly said, continuing to ply Jason’s back. “Domineering and territorial. Robust, especially for your rank. Something else, too. Are you some kind of priest?”

The whole team laughed at that.

“He’s definitely not,” Neil said. “If anything, he’s the exact opposite.”

“It’s a little odd to find a touch of the divine on you, then.”

“I’ve been touched by gods, alright,” Jason said. “They’re quite handsy, once you get to know them.”

## Chapter 184

### More Shady as We Go Along

Tilly provided the group with catalogues that took the form of recording crystals, allowing them to look through projections of the available magic tattoos.

"I'm going to take the burst healing rune," Sophie said and was soon in the big chair in her undershirt as Tilly pricked needles into her arm.

"You want privacy for this?" Jason asked her.

"You've never seen a woman's shoulder before? I feel sorry for that Cassandra girl, now."

By the time the red rune Tilly drew onto Sophie's arm was complete, the others had picked out their own tattoos. Belinda chose one that would allow her to ignore the delay before she could use an ability again. This would allow her to use her cooldown reduction power twice in a row, which would, in turn, let someone else use a powerful ability three times in quick succession. That tattoo was a small one printed on the back of the neck.

Clive took the same one, while Jason took one that made his afflictions slightly harder to resist. Jason's was imprinted on his chest, right over his heart.

"You have an impressively broad repertoire," Humphrey complimented Tilly. "The place I received my tattoo had a more restrictive selection."

"Klimpsen does quality work," Tilly said, not looking up from where she was putting needles into Jason's chest. "He's not what you'd call an innovator, though. He's the guy you go to for reliability, rather than originality."

Neil was originally going to take a tattoo that gave a general increase to his mana recovery speed, but had his mind changed by Tilly. She was able to do a burst mana-recovery tattoo, essentially a free mana potion, with a recharge time affected by his mana recovery rate. Given that Sophie and Clive both enhanced team mana recovery, he would be able to use the tattoo with enviable frequency.

Like Jason, Neil's tattoo went on the chest, but when Neil took his shirt off, it got loud reactions from the team.

"Wow," Belinda said.

"Yep," Sophie agreed, both women tilting their heads as they ran their eyes over Neil's muscular body.

"What?" Neil asked.

"Uh, we all thought you were fat," Clive said.

"Wait, you really did think I was fat?"

"I didn't," Jason said, at which Neil wheeled on him.

"You're the one responsible for this and you didn't even think I was fat?"

"I'm not going to mock an actual fat guy," Jason said. "That's just punching down.

Also, your tailor is the one responsible, not me."

"Your outfits really aren't flattering," Humphrey agreed. "Is there padding in them?"

"No, there isn't padding in them."

"They drape very poorly," Jason said. "You should try Gilbert's in the trade hall back in Greenstone. He sadly doesn't sell short pants or floral print, but if you want to look good, he's your guy."

"You go to Gilbert's too?" Humphrey asked Jason.

"I do," Jason said. "I think he makes you look better than me though. You've got those powerful shoulders."

Once all the tattoos were done, they made arrangements to return the day after next for Jason's crest. After all their shopping, the sky was growing dark and they returned to Hester's house.

Hester's extended family had gathered for her return, welcoming the team into their home for an evening of food and family. Jason quickly found his way to the kitchen, while everyone else gathered on an entertaining deck underground where colourful lights lit up the grotto as they watched the sun go down over the sea through a west-facing cave entrance that looked out along the coast.

Belinda retired early, in anticipation of using no less than sixteen awakening stones the next day, plus summoning at least one familiar. Late in the evening, Sophie spotted Jason in his conjured cloak, walking over the water in the grotto and out through the cave entrance. She quietly dropped over the railing, using her slow-fall power to alight on the surface of the water herself. She followed him out, where the ocean water was eerily still, the light of two moons shining down on it. The hood of Jason's cloak was pushed back of his head, tilted back and looking at the night sky.

"Clive gave you a telling off, the other day," he said, apparently sensing her in spite of her moving in silence. Her perception powers enhanced her ability to sense auras, yet she could barely sense his. Those same abilities had allowed her to sense Jason's aura control as it became increasingly precise in the time they had known one another. She knew the dead friend she had never met had taught Jason the techniques he was passing onto her, fastidious practice seemingly his way of connecting with his absent mentor.

"I probably shouldn't have hit you so much," she said.

“I understand,” Jason said, keeping his gaze on the stars. “I know you were holding back and I wasn’t hurt. You should probably be looking for healthier expressions of freedom, though.”

“Am I free?” She asked.

“If you want to leave and never come back, just talk to Hester,” Jason said. “I told you that from the start.”

“I’ve come a long way since then,” Sophie said. “You’ve put a good amount of capital into making me an adventurer, both monetary and political.”

Jason turned his gaze from the sky to her, frowning.

“I’m tired of having this conversation. I’m tired of justifying myself, as if I’m somehow not good enough to have done something just because it was right. As far as I’m concerned I don’t have an indentured servant. I have a teammate who keeps talking about leaving. If you’re going to go, do us a favour and go now, because we’ll need to find new people.”

“Belinda and I aren’t going anywhere.”

“Good,” he said testily, “because I am done talking about this.”

Jason vanished into the shadow of his cloak, which drifted emptily before disappearing as well.

Sophie stared at the spot he had been standing.

“Good job, Wexler,” she admonished herself.

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In the morning the team left without the guidance of Hester, leaving her to catch up with family. They had seen enough of the city to muddle through, having already visited the Mystic Quarter in which it was located. It wasn’t hard to get directions to the Magic Society campus and Belinda and Neil’s increasing proficiency with the floating discs compensated for the time they lost through lacking of a guide.

Clive took the lead at the Magic Society, his understanding of the Society’s workings getting them prompt consideration. They decided the order of the day would be to hire a ritual room and conduct all Belinda’s remaining awakening rituals. Afterwards, they would purchase the materials Jason and Belinda would need to summon familiars. Belinda already had one such power and, with sixteen powers to be awakened, had a good chance of getting more.

“A companion specialist would be interesting,” Humphrey said. “My sister’s abilities are like that. It would make for some interesting potential, on top of the familiars and summons we already have.”



“I think a support specialist is more likely,” Clive said, “based on the power’s we’ve seen so far. Only four powers in, though, it could be anything, really.”

“Either works for me,” Belinda said. “As long as I’m not in front of someone, swinging a great big sword.”

“We have Humphrey for that,” Jason said.

As they awakened Belinda’s powers one by one, her abilities fell broadly into three categories. As expected, her trap essence produced area control powers. One was an ability Clive had from the rune essence, called rune trap. Another conjured a dimensional-space pit trap under the feet of enemies, while the final two powers used magical tethers to affect enemies in different ways.

From the magic essence she gained abilities with effects predicated on the powers of others. She had a curse that caused enemy power use to lock them out from another of their abilities. An ability called power thief was a special ranged attack that would lock out an enemy’s power, giving Belinda the power to use instead. She had a spell that let her mimic spells recently used by allies, while her final ability was another summoned familiar, called an astral lantern.

“Lantern-type familiars are quite good,” Humphrey said. “Judging by my sister’s, at least.”

“They tend to be ranged attackers,” Clive said.

The adept essence started out well, with a perception power that let her see magic, like Clive. It got better with an aura that caused allied abilities to come off cooldown faster, followed by a power, usable once per day, that reset every cooldown a person had. It was the last adept ability to awaken where things started going off the rails, at least from Belinda’s perspective.

- 
- You have awakened the adept essence ability [Instant Adept]. You have awakened 5 of 5 adept essence abilities.
  - You have awakened all adept essence abilities. Linked attribute [Speed] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank adept essence ability.

Ability: [Instant Adept] (Adept)

- Special ability.
- Cost: Very high mana.
- Cooldown: 6 hours.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).

- **Effect (iron):** Gain a significant increase to the [Speed] attribute and temporary proficiency with acrobatics, small blades and ranged weapons. Your maximum stamina increases and you gain an ongoing stamina recovery effect.
- 

“What kind of ability is this?” she asked as she read the power.

“I’ve seen these before,” Clive said. “They bestow a particular set of skills, much like a skill-book, but only temporarily. It lets you fill archetypal roles, not as well as a specialist, obviously, but if that’s what you need at the time then it’s very useful.”

“It says ranged weapons,” Jason said. “It might be good. Get yourself a good magic bow, fire some arrows down range and then escape with those acrobatic skills it mentions.”

“I suppose that isn’t too bad,” Belinda said grudgingly before they moved onto the next power.

By that stage, she only had two powers from the charlatan essence left to awaken, which had already produced two unusual powers. Beside myself was a power that rendered her invisible while an illusion mimicked her nearby. Unexpected allies was a power that used illusions to make allies look like enemies, but the allies could see through it. The spell then randomly switch-teleported all the allies and enemies in the area with each other.

“It has to be better than that stupid learning archery power,” Belinda said as Clive completed the ritual.

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- **You have awakened the charlatan essence ability [Counterfeit Combatant]. You have awakened 4 of 5 charlatan essence abilities.**

#### Ability: [Counterfeit Combatant] (Charlatan)

- **Special ability (shape-change).**
  - **Cost: Very high mana.**
  - **Cooldown: 6 hours.**
  
  - **Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).**
  
  - **Effect (iron):** Gain a significant increase to the [Power] attribute and temporary proficiency with armour and melee weaponry. Your physique enlarges, your maximum stamina increases and you gain an ongoing stamina recovery effect.
- 

“Oh, gods damn it.”

“It does bring some versatility to the team,” Humphrey offered.

“I don’t want versatility! The team’s already thick with versatility! I want to stand at the back, being all clever and disruptive. What’s clever about braining some guy with a scimitar?”

“It doesn’t have to be clever,” Humphrey said. “It just has to be useful.”

“You think putting me up the front to hit people will be useful?”

“It’ll be unexpected,” Jason offered. “Who expects a small, adorable person to whack them upside the head with a big hammer?”

“I think I understand the specific dimensional space you awakened now,” Clive said. “As you’ll no doubt recall, it’s unique nuance was the ability to directly equip or unequip gear. Given your new abilities to take on specific roles, that now becomes very useful.”

“Are you telling me that my next ability might be another one of these idiotic powers to hit people with weapons, like a thug?”

“I wouldn’t think so,” Clive said. “You already have powers to turn you into a fast attacker and a strong attacker.”

“Maybe you’ll be able to turn into a healer,” Neil said. “The ability to have another in a pinch would be amazing.”

“That’s true,” Belinda acknowledged, calming down. Clive conducted her final ritual of awakening.

- 
- You have awakened the charlatan essence ability [Specious Sorcerer]. You have awakened 5 of 5 charlatan essence abilities.
  - You have awakened all charlatan essence abilities. Linked attribute [Recovery] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank adept essence ability.

#### Ability: [Specious Sorcerer] (Charlatan)

- Special ability.
- Cost: Very high mana.
- Cooldown: 6 hours.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): Gain a significant increase to the [Spirit] attribute and the ability to use magical tools. Your maximum mana increases and you gain an ongoing mana recovery effect.

---

Belinda groaned.

“Is it just me,” she asked, “or are these ability names becoming more shady as we go along?”

“These abilities may seem underwhelming now,” Clive said, “but remember this is only the beginning. Power like these usually offer up extra powers to use while they are active. Your adept power will most likely give utility abilities, while the strength and magic based ones will probably give you special attacks and spells, respectively. You could even consider them to be a means to get more abilities than everyone else.”

“Yeah?” Belinda asked thoughtfully. “I do like the idea of having more things.”

“That’s everyone’s powers complete,” Humphrey said. “Summoning familiars aside, we’re ready to get down to the real work.”

“The real work?” Neil asked.

“Training,” Jason said, Humphrey nodding his agreement.

“Between us, we have an adventurer and a half worth of abilities to learn. The next few weeks will be strategising, testing, training and then doing it all over again. We won’t just be learning how to use our powers but how to use them as a team. It’s going to take weeks, maybe months to get where we need to be.”

“Months?” Sophie asked.

“It won’t be as tedious as he makes it sounds,” Jason said. “We should all be ready to work hard, though.”

“I had an idea to inspire us a little,” Humphrey said. “There’s a public mirage area in this city. I asked Hester to reserve us a viewing room for this evening. I think seeing what the best of a large city like this can do will show you how far we have to go. If I have anything to say about it, we’ll become better than anyone we see tonight.”

## Chapter 185

### Magnificent Entity

“Moment of truth,” Jason said. He had drawn out the summoning circle himself, rather than let Clive draw it out with his ritual diagram power. All the materials were laid out; spirit coins, quintessence gems and other magical objects. After sprinkling some powdered lesser magic cores to double check everything was correct, he stood up, preparing to chant the incantation.

“When Gary heard Jason would be getting new familiars,” Humphrey whispered, “he tried to bet me the incantation would be really evil.”

“You didn’t take that bet, did you?” Sophie asked him.

“Gods, no.”

“Do you mind?” Jason asked. “I’m trying to summon an awesome British shadow creature.”

“Sorry,” Humphrey said. “You go ahead.”

“Well, I’m self conscious, now,” Jason said. “You’re all going to interpret the incantation as evil, even when it’s just a normal, harmless incantation.”

“It’ll be fine,” Humphrey said. “We promise to keep an open mind.”

“I don’t,” Neil said.

“Just do it,” Sophie said. “It’s not going to seem any less evil for all the build up.”

Jason groaned, but turned back to his ritual circle and started chanting.

*“I call to the realm beyond cold and darkness, where death has no meaning for life has no place. Let mine be the dark beyond darkness, falling on the final road to the end of all things. Let mine be the shadow of death.”*

As Jason chanted, dark energy started boiling up to submerge the ritual circle.

“I don’t know what we were worried about,” Neil said. “That didn’t seem at all like he was calling up some all-consuming darkness and that we should kill him to keep it from entering the world.”

“I don’t know that I’d say evil,” Humphrey said with very little conviction.

“You wish you’d taken that bet then?” Sophie asked.

“No, I do not,” Humphrey said.

Jason dropped to his knees, then rolled onto his back. He took out a mana potion and chugged it to assuage the low mana headache suddenly pounding the inside of his skull.

“That was a lot easier than last time,” he said. “Summoning Colin didn’t just drain just my mana, but my health and stamina, too.”

Everyone's gaze turned to the ritual circle where darkness rose up like fire's dark twin, consuming light instead of shedding it, the room seeming to grow dim in spite of the magical glow-stones.

"That's odd," Clive said. "These stones are shielded so as to not affect the ambient magic in the room. Nothing in here should be able to affect them."

From the dark circle of black flame, a figure slowly rose. Nothing more than a silhouette, it seemed ephemeral, yet at the same time imposing. It had the rough shape of a man draped in a cloak. Jason's teammates couldn't help but think of Jason himself, as he looked with his magical cloak completely dimmed.

Suddenly the oppressive feeling drained away. The room lit back up and the black flames vanished, leaving only the figure who looked to be made from darkness itself, his edges blurry, even standing in the light.

"Hello again, Jason Asano."

"Shade," Jason said, a huge grin spreading across his face. "I was hoping it would be you."

"It has been some time since I walked the worlds," Shade said. "You seem likely to see more than most. I should warn you, that the vessels I inhabit now are far less capable than those I was bound to in the astral space."

"Vessels, plural?" Jason asked. He reached out a hand to touch Shade.

- 
- Shade (shadow of the Reaper).
  - Familiar (iron rank).
  
  - Incorporeal.
  - Can occupy up to three shadow bodies.
  - Highly visible in well-lit areas but can move rapidly.
  - Shadow bodies can hide within the shadows of other people. When there is not at least one shadow body attached to the summoner, the summoner has no shadow.
  - Can drain mana by touch. Drained mana can be passed onto anyone with a shadow body hidden within their shadow.
  - While at least one shadow body is hidden within the summoner's shadow, summoner can see and hear through other shadow bodies.
  - Shadow bodies hidden in the summoner's shadow can contain traces of the summoner's presence. One shadow body can eliminate either the caster's heat, scent or sound, with additional shadow bodies eliminating additional factors.

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"Shade," Jason said, "I think that will do just fine. Speaking of the astral space, though, did you happen to notice anyone who stayed behind when everyone else left?"

“Yes,” Shade said. “When the trial period ended, the vessels I was inhabiting were dissolved, returning me to the astral. This was the moment the gates closed, therefore those who had not used them remain there still. I am aware of which people they are.”

“You know who stayed behind?” Jason asked. “Actual names?”

“Yes. The powers afforded me by the vessels I inhabited were powerful. All that was said, I heard.”

“That’s pretty amazing,” Jason said and turned to his team. “I’m going to hire one of the Magic Society’s water communication chambers and get that list of names back to Greenstone. In the meantime, you summon up your familiars, Belinda. I’m pretty tired, anyway, after doing mine. I can finish up when you’re done.”

Shade sidled into Jason’s shadow and Jason left without any indication of his new passenger’s presence. The rest of the group cleared away the remnants of his summoning circle and Belinda started setting up her own. Like Jason, she was drawing her own magic diagram, with advice, but not assistance, from Clive.

Belinda’s first summon had a more mystical and less sinister chant than Jason’s. Its appearance was heralded by silver-blue light that filled the room before coalescing over the ritual circle, compressing down until a silver lantern appeared around it. The lantern started floating around the room, bathing it in a cool light.

“It’s pretty,” she said. “I like this much more than some death shadow.”

“Shade was good to us in the astral space,” Sophie said. “He was presumably good to everyone, but I like him.”

Belinda was drained from the summoning, following Jason’s example and drinking a potion to relieve the mental exhaustion. Her familiar was bobbing in the air around her like a puppy seeking attention and she reached out to touch it.

- 
- Unnamed (astral lantern).
  - Familiar (iron rank).
  
  - Reveals nearby hidden enemies.
  - Makes ranged attacks with bolts of disruptive-force, consuming small amounts of core energy.
  - Can intercept and negate magical projectiles. Negating powerful projectiles consumes core energy.
  - Core energy naturally replenishes over time. Summoner can use mana to restore core energy.
  - Familiar can be subsumed into the caster’s eyes. When it has done so, the summoner can see hidden enemies and consume mana to make disruptive-force beam attacks from her eyes.
-

"You need a need a name, little guy," Belinda said. "Floaty? Sparkles?"

"That's terrible," Sophie said.

"You have a better idea?" Belinda asked.

Sophie thought it over as she looked at the silver lantern with the silver-blue light.

"How about Shimmer?" she said.

"I like that," Humphrey said.

"That is pretty good," Belinda said, then turned to her familiar. "What do you think? Do you like Shimmer?"

The lantern waggled side to side in the air.

"Does anyone know if that means yes?" Belinda asked.

Jason only returned once Belinda had recovered and mostly laid out her next ritual circle.

"Since it wasn't a scheduled message," Jason said, "I had to wait for them to go get someone. I wasn't just going to drop that information to anyone, so I spoke to Rufus."

"That extra time would have been expensive."

"Rufus said he'd get the Adventure Society to pony up for it."

"Pony?"

"It's like a small horse."

"Those are the one-headed heidels, right?"

"Yeah, except with silky hair instead of creepy reptile scales."

"And what does they have to with paying for things?"

"Nothing."

"Then why did you say it?"

"Because language is weird."

"You know, you could make more of an effort to be understood through your translation power."

"Your Mum understands me."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Humphrey asked.

Jason groaned.

"Sometimes trying to aggravate people in this world only aggravates me," he complained, then levelled a suspicious gaze at Humphrey. "Were you being deliberately obtuse just to get under my skin?"

A grin teased the corners of Humphrey's mouth.

"You shouldn't be talking about my mother."

"That's true," Jason said. "That is not wrath I'd be looking to suffer."



Belinda completed her ritual and summoned her other familiar. Unlike the previous two, it was not foreshadowed by phenomena, suddenly appearing out of nowhere. It was a strange, flickering entity, skipping around the room without passing through the intervening space. Its form constantly shifted, changing with each flickering teleport. It first appeared with Belinda's form, then Humphrey's, then Clive's. Then it was a strange amalgam of Sophie and Neil, but only for a moment as the changes continued. Sometimes it would replicate a member of the group, other times, melding two or more forms together in a bizarre gestalt. It never took any kind of form of its own.

It stilled slightly, holding in place as Belinda approached it but still flickering, like a television with bad reception. She reached out and touched it.

- 
- Unnamed (echo spirit).
  - Familiar (iron rank).
  
  - Incorporeal.
  - Can mimic the form of enemies or allies.
  - Can switch-teleport with mimicked allies.
  - Can mirror the mimicked ally's movements and attacks, but inflicts no damage or other effects.
  - When subsumed into the summoner's aura, the summoner can manipulate their own aura, projecting false traits or mimicking the aura of others.
- 

"It's deception based," she said. "It works like Humphrey's new power to make an illusionary double."

"It'll be interesting to see if it doubles Humphrey's illusionary double," Jason said. "That would make him almost impossible to defend against, short of running away."

Once again Belinda needed to pick out a name. She ultimately accepted Jason's suggestion of Gemini.

"It means twins in a language from my world," he explained.

That left Jason's final familiar, which he started setting up for.

"That last incantation was pretty bad," Neil said. "This one is called an avatar of doom, though. Who's going to bet which incantation is more evil?"

"Seriously?" Jason asked, not looking up from his task.

"I'll take avatar of doom," Sophie said. "It has to be worse."

"I don't know," Belinda said. "That whole bit about the end of all things in the last one was pretty bad. I'll bet on the shadow incantation."

"Yes, I'll take the shadow familiar as well," Clive said.

"Oh, come on, Clive," Jason said. "You too?"

“What about you, Humphrey?” Belinda asked.

“No, he’s the judge,” Neil said. “He has to be objective, so I’ll round out the numbers and pick the new one as worse.”

“I should kick you all out and do this alone.”

Belinda and Sophie immediately booed him, Neil joining in as well. He turned around to glare at them as Humphrey and Clive shrugged their shoulders, helplessly. Jason shook his head and ignored them until he was done.

“We didn’t decide what we were betting for,” Belinda said.

“The losers buy everyone’s snacks at the mirage chamber tonight,” Neil said.

“That’s reasonable,” Clive said.

“Really, Clive?” Jason asked.

“You don’t get to complain,” Neil said. “Your snacks get bought for you either way.”

“My issues aren’t snack-related,” Jason said.

“Maybe just get it done and out of the way?” Humphrey suggested.

“You’re just in it because your snacks are guaranteed, too.”

Scowling, Jason turned back to his ritual circle and started chanting.

*“When worlds end, you are the arbiter. When gods fall, you are the instrument. Herald of annihilation, come forth and be my harbinger. I have doom to bring.”*

At first, it seemed like nothing was happening. Neil had just opened his mouth to accuse Jason of getting it wrong when the glow stones lighting the room started flickering.

“That really shouldn’t be happening,” Clive said.

The glow stones started going out, one by one, until the room was plunged into darkness. Then they all flared up at once, flooding the room with glare before they started shattering, stone fragments falling into the crystal that should have shielded them from anything in the room.

After the blinding brightness, the dark seemed especially deep. As they looked around, a speck of orange light appeared, floating over the circle. It expanded, swirling in the dark like a nebula in the void of space. The orange was joined by blue and soon they could see the expanding colours take the shape of an orange eye with a vibrant blue iris.

The darkness around the nebula eye started to coalesce, taking on physical substance the way Jason’s conjured cloak did. It even took on the form of a cloak, draping around the nebula eye, which floated where the torso would be. Two orbs manifested around the cloak, themselves smaller versions of the eye. One was blue in orange, the other, orange in blue. They drifted through the air, slowly circling the cloak like guardians.

Jason's teammates had been poised to mock the incantation but were transfixed by the beauty of the familiar. In the darkness left from the shattered glow stones, the eye nebula and the floating orbs were the only sources of light.

"Ah, crap," Jason said. "I'm going to be a chuuni forever."

"Hey, Clive," Neil said.

"Uh, yeah?" Clive said.

"I'm guessing that wasn't meant to happen either."

"No, it was not," Clive said, his normal inquisitiveness reasserting itself as he moved to stand next to Jason and look at the new familiar.

"It's curious that the familiars are both reflective of your appearance," Clive observed. "Your appearance while wearing your cloak, anyway. I did notice that Shade looks somewhat different than he did in the astral space. There, his silhouette was closer to a person's form, instead of the cloak shape he inhabits now."

"Can you speak?" Jason asked the familiar. The shadowy cowl shook its empty non-head slowly, an ominous gesture in the light coming from its own body. Its cloak shape was dominated by the eye, but the rest of the space in the cloak was slowly being occupied by what looked like a less formed nebula, with shades of red, green purple and other colours that shifted like a rainbow tide.

"You can understand me, though, that's good," Jason said. "Let's try this: Make the orb that's blue on the outside glow slightly brighter for yes and the one that's orange on the outside for no. Can you do that?"

The blue orb glowed brighter.

"Nice. This will work out just fine."

He reached out to touch the avatar, his hand getting a strange tingle as it met the light of the nebula eye.

- 
- Unnamed (avatar of doom).
  - Familiar (iron rank).
  
  - Incorporeal.
  - Each orb can make sustained beam attacks. One orb inflicts disruptive-force damage, the other, resonating-force damage.
  - Enemies damaged by the avatar are afflicted with [Vulnerable]. Sustained beam damage will cause additional instances to be accrued.
  - The avatar's normal movement is slow but it can make rapid energy dashes, inflicting disruptive-force damage on enemies in the path of the dash. Orbs do not attack during the dash.
  - Can be subsumed into the summoner's aura, making the summoner's aura much harder to detect and read.

- [Vulnerable] (affliction, unholy, stacking): All resistances are reduced. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Consumed to cleanse instances of [Resistant] on a 1:1 basis.
- 

“No name, then?”

Orange orb.

“Do you want one?”

Blue orb.

“Yeah, you should have one. I can’t be all ‘hey, Avatar of Doom, do you want a sausage?’ That would be absurd.”

“It doesn’t look like it’s big on sausages,” Belinda said.

“You have to give it a majestic name,” Neil said. “Even I’m willing to acknowledge that is a magnificent entity.”

Jason rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “I’m going to call you... Gordon.”

“What?”

“No!”

“You can’t call it that!”

“What do you say, Gordon?” Jason asked. “Want to go take a look at the mirage arena?”

Blue orb.