

Chapter 249

Being What he Needs to Be

Jason could barely stand in the wake of Neil's spell wearing off, but he determinedly pushed himself to his feet.

"We need to move with alacrity," Shade said. "The cult's forces approach."

Jason nodded, pausing only to spare what was left of Anisa a brief glance. He was again reminded that most of the people he had first met on arriving in this world were dead. Most of the Vane family, their servants, Farrah and now Anisa. For all the wonders his new home offered, it took its price in horrors, and Jason was unsure if he had become one of them.

"Shade, grab her dimensional bag and mount up."

The possessions of the archbishop had automatically been looted by Jason's power when his execute ability completely annihilated him. Looting powers could extricate goods from personal dimensional spaces, although Jason didn't stop to check what he had taken.

The team left the ruined building behind. Shade had taken the form of some large lizards, well-suited to navigating the terrain. Sophie and Clive had already helped Belinda onto the back of Onslow. Having taken a spirit coin, she was in worse shape than Jason and Humphrey. Jason and Neil rode Shade out, Humphrey rode Stash, while Sophie easily kept pace on foot. They didn't stop for hours, making sure to get well clear of the site of their battle.

Once they were confident there was no one trailing them, rest became the next order of business. Jason pulled out the cloud house inside a building they found with an internal space large enough to contain it. It was a church, although not to a god any of them recognised. Any lingering divine aura the building might have once hosted had long ago faded away.

Sophie took watch, keeping an eye out for cultists scouts. Humphrey, Jason and Belinda retreated into the house to recuperate, as neither spirit coin usage nor Neil's spell could be rushed through recovery using magic. They quickly fell asleep in the comforting embrace of cloud chairs while Neil kept an eye on their conditions.

Before collapsing, Jason had divested himself of everything his looting power had plucked from the archbishop's personal storage space. Clive went over it, along with the contents of Anisa's dimensional bag.

There was a very large number of potions and a startling amount of money. Hendren, it seemed, had taken a large chunk of the church of Purity's coffers with him on

'sabbatical.' Those things he put aside, in favour of a good-sized collection of documents and a very full bookcase.

"It's mostly correspondence from higher-ups in the church," Clive said to Neil, going through the documents. He had taken a quick peruse of all the items and was now taking a closer look at the documents.

"Anything useful?" Neil asked.

"I'm not sure how much of it will be of use to us," Clive said. "The Adventure Society will definitely want to get their hands on these, though. There is correspondence here with explicit statements about the agreement between the church and the cult."

"Anything about why the church of Purity would throw in with these people?" Neil asked.

"Not at a glance," Clive said. "It'll take me a while to go through it all properly. It does seem that the ones siding with the cult are only a fraction of the church, though."

"That makes sense," Neil said. "If the whole church knew, there's no way they could have kept it a secret."

"There also seems to have been a concern that a lot of the church members would not be accepting of the arrangement."

"You mean they thought priests who literally worship Purity wouldn't be accommodating to a cult that fills people's bodies and souls with evil magic junk? That was probably a good assessment."

"I have to think that most of Purity's worshippers aren't secretly evil," Clive said.

"I suspect Jason would disagree."

"Well, Jason has his biases," Clive said. "He comes from a world where the gods apparently don't show themselves at all and let the people wage wars over the truth. Then he comes here, and the first clergyperson he meets is that priestess we just killed. She wasn't exactly a good ambassador for the virtues of faith."

"Then it turns out an ostensibly good church is in league with an evil cult," Neil said. "I can see why he might end up wary of the whole thing."

"Even the Purity church members who are in on it clearly don't like the people they're allied with," Clive said, gesturing absently with a sheet of paper. "This is a letter to Hendren, more or less telling him to put up with it and do what he's told. While the faction working with the cult certainly believe they have their god on their side, they seem very unhappy with the alliance. It seems the cult had to pressure the church into coming along on this expedition at all."

“I would have been happy for them to stay at home,” Neil. “I imagine they would be too, now their leader’s been dissolved into nothing.”

Neil glanced warily over at the sleeping Jason.

“Does Asano ever scare you at all?” he asked quietly. “Most of the time he seems ridiculous, but sometimes he really, really doesn’t. When he just walked into that town and killed all those bandits. The way he looked at them, like they were nothing.”

“Jason is good at being what he needs to be, in order to do what he needs to do,” Clive said, likewise speaking softly. “Sometimes, what he needs to do is kill a lot of people. And yes; seeing what he becomes to do that does scare me a little.”

“Hopefully, it scares the Builder, too. From the Builder’s perspective, pulling in the church for this must seem like a waste, now. He brought along an extra silver-ranker who didn’t accomplish anything but die.”

“Their rush to put us down cost them one of their most powerful people,” Clive said. “Whatever else, we can be certain that the Builder isn’t happy.”

“This has worked out very well,” the Builder said. “Losing Hendren’s power is a blow, obviously, but he was a reluctant ally at best.”

“You want to step up the kind of procedure we use on his people,” Zato said.

“Precisely,” the Builder agreed. “Now that the church’s leadership here is dead, there is little concern about any survivors reporting to their god when we are done here. We no longer have to take half-measures in converting the clergymen, to protect Hendren’s sensibilities.”

“There are other bronze-rankers in their number,” Zato said.

“None who held a leadership position like Lasalle. That they died together helps us more than either of them surviving. None of the remaining clergy will be able to pull the rest together and effectively resist our intentions. Take them into custody and prepare the iron-rankers for immediate conversion.”

“What do we do with their bronze-rankers?” Zato asked. “We can’t convert them with clockwork cores we get from sacrificing our iron-rankers.”

“That is a question,” the Builder said. “The failure to summon the clockwork king and the cores it could produce truly was the beginning of things going wrong with your operations. If your former superiors had the ability to adapt to circumstances you have demonstrated, we would be in a better position right now. You have demonstrated a talent for making the most of what you are given. What do you suggest?”

Zato rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“We could prepare them for use as additional vessels, but that would take too long. Maybe...”

Zato’s gaze lingered on the ruined body of the Builder’s withered husk of a body.

“You’re about to abandon that vessel,” Zato said. “You have instructed me to see it destroyed, but perhaps we can put it to a better use.”

“Explain,” the Builder said.

“We feed it the bronze-rank clergymen. Fatten it up, then send it after the Rejector and his people. An energy vampire gets little from feeding on monsters and will go hunting for richer meals. It may well be able to sniff out the souls of our enemies. We can make it our hunting hound, flushing them into the open, or even killing them outright. It might not work, but what does it cost us to try? A spent vessel and some priests we would probably have to execute anyway.”

“Your proposal has merit,” the Builder said. “An energy vampire will have no interest in our people. The soul and body modifications you have undergone make you unpalatable to them. If we are going to convert all the clergy or feed them to the vampire directly, then it will have no more interest in us.”

The Builder nodded, dry skin flaking of its face at the gesture.

“Very well,” the Builder said. “Seize the clergy, prepare the iron-rankers for conversion and collar the bronze-rankers. Prepare a binding circle to hold the vessel once I am done with it and we shall conduct the vessel exchange. Afterward, we can begin the conversions.”

“The more thorough conversions than we originally intended will add to the time required,” Zato said. “It will better prepare us for the next step, however. We have to assume that once we start sending teams out, the Rejector will try and intervene.”

“Let him,” the Builder said. “His rejection of the star seed may have inured him to further implantation, but his companions enjoy no such immunity. I will take them, one by one, and he will watch. Once that is done, they will be the ones to kill him.”

“How many potions can one person carry?” Belinda asked, looking at them all stacked up. “We didn’t bring in this many for six people over a series of months.”

“These are iron, bronze and silver-rank,” Jason said. “This is probably the supply for his whole contingent.”

The team was going through what they had taken from the Archbishop. His most important gear had been on his body and destroyed along with it, but looting his personal storage space had still yielded a slew of valuables. Since they were already going over

loot, it seemed like a good chance to tally their collected loot from months of monster hunting, which they added to the pile.

They had a lot of materials that would be valuable for crafting. At an earlier stage they had purged their stocks of the iron-rank materials to make room for bronze and silver. They also had what had become a huge stockpile of monster cores, on top of the essences and awakening stones picked up along the way.

Fully-functioning magic items were produced by Neil and Jason's looting powers far less frequently than materials. The rarity of such items was mostly low, although the silver-rank monsters they fought had produced a few items that were more impressive. They were all silver-rank, so not yet of any use to the team. One item in particular stood out amongst the others.

Item: [Orb of Ascension (Silver)] (silver rank, legendary)

An orb containing the most precious power of all: potential (consumable, magic core).

- **Effect:** A single epic or legendary quality bronze-rank item gains the ability to be increased in rank through a ritual of ascension. Additional material requirements vary based on the effected item.

A few of the bronze-rank items had been claimed by the team. Jason had replaced his iron-rank boots with a pair of black boots taken from an insectoid monster called a night hopper. The new boots were higher rank but lower rarity than his existing boots, lacking the whip-blade function that Jason had used only occasionally, but always effectively.

As they moved onto bronze and silver-rank monsters, the iron-rank boots had become increasingly battered. Without the self-repair function of his main armour, they had become so ragged that he feared they would be too damaged and lose the enchantment.

The new boots also lacked self-repair, but were very sturdy, even for a bronze-rank item. Most importantly, they replicated the most important functions of his old boots. The jumping power was even stronger than on his old boots, which had become a critical part of how he moved around. Added to his heightened, bronze-rank attributes, the new boots gave him more of exactly what he wanted. It was the final trait that was the true reason he made the switch, and without it, he would never have picked the new footwear. They colour-coordinated with his armour.

Belinda had done the best out of the entire team, largely because she could use such a wide array of gear. Her various abilities that replicated different roles each needed their

own gear set to have full effect. This was especially true given that she would never match up to a true specialised with her stop-gap powers.

She had purchased a variety of bare-bones equipment sets before they left, picked out with the aid of Gary's expert eye. She had sacrificed everything else at the altar of cost-effectiveness, giving her what Jason described as a 'quest reward hodge-podge' look. This was only exacerbated as she added items looted from their opponents, but the results had been worth the effort. She might look a bit unprofessional in her eclectic outfits, but her ability to be exactly what the team needed was stronger than ever.

The Builder's walled encampment was filled with screams.

"You did an impressive job arranging for so many to be converted at once with the available space," the Builder said.

"Thank you, Lord," Timos said. "I know that you like efficiency. I managed to create enough stations that all of our ritualists can be work simultaneously. It's grisly, but hardly the first place we've painted with blood."

"Things are moving quickly because this is their field of expertise," Zato said. "Our problems have all come from their needing to take on the astral magic duties after Landemere Vane was killed."

"That was a grave disappointment," Timos said. "I'd been cultivating him for years. I was quite pleased with how he'd turned out."

"There is more astral magic to be done," the Builder said. "Now I am here to direct things personally, however. All that is required is that they follow direction."

"That much I can assure you they are capable of," Zato said. "I made quite certain of that."

"The next obstacle is that the altered state of the ambient magic," the Builder said. "Naturally, I have the knowledge to compensate in activating the gates, but this vessel isn't powerful enough to open portals and transport our people around the astral space."

"Once the conversions are complete, we will be able to put together teams strong enough to navigate the dangers outside the walls. The need to physically travel to each location instead of just portalling is logistically more involved, but ultimately all it will cost us is time and a few casualties to monsters."

"And the Rejector," Timos added. "His team are coordinated and fearless. I escaped immediately and it was still enough time to see that. They are also powerful enough to deal with Hendren. Only the best bronze-rank teams could have done that."

Timos was still shaken by his encounter with Jason's team. Jason's spell that landed as Timos was fleeing had burned a symbol into Timos' face that the Builder had identified as the word 'sin,' from a symbolic language older than their world. The builder had to remove the curses before the light but prominent mark would heal.

"We will lose people to the Rejector," the Builder said, "but we hold the advantage. We still have the strength and we still have the numbers, while they do not have the luxury of staying hidden. They will be forced to climb out of their hole if they intend to understand what we are doing, let alone attempt to stop us."