

Chapter 201

Regretting it Later

Jason looked around the skimmer as it sailed smoothly over the rocky ground. It was an unremarkable patch of desert, but the walk between the mountain and its hidden sacrifice chamber and the Vane Estate had been an important time for Jason. It was his first chance to slow down and get some answers from someone who didn't want to eat him or throw him in an evil blood pit.

That was when he really met Rufus, with his solid dependability and Gary with his boisterous enthusiasm. Then there was Farrah. She was the one who made the team work, bringing Gary into line when it was time for business and loosening Rufus up when he was causing unnecessary tension. Smarter than either, she could have easily led a team of her own. She was wise enough to recognise that she didn't want to, leaving that to Rufus while she engaged in her own pursuits.

Jason hadn't realised that, at the time. He was still agape at the terrifying volcano powers she had used to annihilate the sanguine horror. He was only just getting to know the people who would be his first friends and mentors in his new world.

Returning to the place it had all started, the path he had taken weighed heavily on his mind. It was a path of violence from the very beginning, so different from the safe, prosperous life he had known. That first night he had spoken to Rufus of his fears, of what a life of violence could turn him into. Rufus had not given him the reassurance he sought.

Instead, Rufus told Jason that he would have to choose between holding onto his innocence or seizing his own destiny. He promised that a life of adventure would give Jason the world, but it would come at a price. That price was safety and the inescapable stain of bloody hands. Looking back, Rufus' promise had been kept. Jason had money, power, influence. Precious friends and boon companions. But he had also faced danger, and been the danger faced by others. It could be considered a naïveté, but he wondered if violence and killing had become too easy.

The need for violence and the moral action was a harder thing to balance than he ever thought. He was proud of his growing capability, and largely of what he had done with it. But that pride also brought danger and regret. He'd gone along with everyone else to fight the Ustei tribe on their sand barge, and while they had certainly needed to be stopped, no more than a token effort had been put towards conciliation. That he didn't know how many people he killed that day was bad enough. That it had been for someone else's reasons made it all the worse.

He thought about the men he killed in the shopping arcade. For all that he told himself it was justified, he could have easily escaped without hurting anyone. In his most honest moments, he knew he didn't kill them in self-defence or through some need to send a message. Not any message worth sending, anyway. It had been pride. They had the temerity to challenge him and he had wanted – needed – to let everyone know that to come for him was to pay the price in blood.

Thadwick Mercer was, at the core, a creature of pride. It was what made him so easy to wound and drove every mistake he made. In the Reaper trials, Jason had come face to face with his own dark future, with the place that pride would take him, if he was not mindful of it.

That he had been more successful than Thadwick made people more accepting of his pride, but that was a trap. Something that made his pride more insidious, more dangerous. He had dismissed the Adventure Society's need for him to make a humble gesture, thinking himself clever for turning it to his own purpose. He was coming to realise that he had a greater need to find some humility than he thought.

"Is that it?" Clive asked, next to him, as they crossed a rocky rise.

When Jason had first spotted the Vane Estate those months ago, it had been an incongruous stretch of green. Rufus had remarked on what a waste of resources it was to maintain a temperate springtime in the middle of the desert. From the yellows and browns that had replaced the green, that price was apparently no longer being paid.

"That's it," Jason said, double-checking his map. "It looks a bit worse for wear than the last time I was there."

"Stop the skimmer on the outside," Henrietta said, leaning forward to speak to Clive. "We don't think there'll be anyone in residence, but the Adventure Society wants us checking for a reason. Best not announce ourselves too loudly."

As they approached, they found wilting plants, withered bushes and half-barren trees, their remaining leaves the brown, red and yellow of deep autumn. The Vane Estate had been an English country garden, held in a perpetual spring. As the energy maintaining the artificial climate depleted, that spring was passing through a deep autumn on the way to a sun-scorched, desert winter.

The pillars placed along the outside edge of the estate grounds still marked the border between the desert and the estate. Clive drew the skimmer up next to one and the team disembarked and stepped across the boundary. The air inside was still cooler than the desert, but hotter than what Jason remembered. Guided by Jason's map, they set off across the yellowing grass for the inner reaches of the sprawling estate.

“That’s the hedge maze,” Jason pointed out. The towering hedge walls looked thinner than he remembered, the pale green hedges a pale reflection of its previous, lush glory. “I came into this world somewhere in the middle of that.”

“Is that what made that big hole?” Sophie asked, pointing. There was a ragged arch in the hedges, mirrored in the hedges they could see through it.

“No, that was Gary,” Jason said. “He and Farrah sent their summons right through the middle of it. He said it was to sweep out any cultists, but I think it was mostly to annoy Anisa.”

“Anisa?” Henrietta asked.

“Priestess of Purity. She was temporarily attached to Rufus’ team. The church were the ones that sent them out here, which we think was all part of their game-playing. I have to imagine an alliance between them and the Builder cult is an uneasy one.”

“It seems dangerous for the cult to involve outsiders, like that,” Belinda said. “Too much chance of exposure. Getting too impressed with the cleverness of your own plans is a sure way to mess them up.”

“The Builder cult apparently had their hearts set on this place,” Jason said. “I can see how the combination of isolation, space and comfort would appeal. The matriarch of the house didn’t like the Builders, though. Didn’t approve of her son being part of the wrong cult.”

“You seem to run into a lot of cultists,” Humphrey said.

“Oh, that’s nothing,” Jason said. “Back in my world they come to your door with pamphlets.”

He turned his gaze back to the hedge maze.

“I couldn’t tell you exactly where I appeared in there. My arrival didn’t seem to do any damage, and every place looks like every other in a maze. Which is the whole point, I guess.”

As they progressed through the estate, they saw more and more damage beyond that caused by the desert reclaiming the land. Someone had taken axe and flame to the place, breaking down outbuildings and torching gardens. When they reached the manor, it had clearly taken the brunt of whatever ire had driven the vandals. Only sections of burned and collapsed building still stood at the original height. Every section of wall intact enough to fit it had been painted with bright red graffiti, denouncing the inhabitants as blood drinkers and murderers.

“It seems word got out about the blood cult preying on the nearby towns and villages,” Humphrey said. “There isn’t much of a manor left to check out.”

“There were some fairly extensive cellars,” Jason said. “They may be intact.”

The team made their way into the gutted ruin of the manor house.

“Careful of the parts that haven’t collapsed yet,” Henrietta warned.

They quickly discovered that the floors had been burned through, dumping the charred remains of the house above into blackened piles in the expansive cellar space. Jason managed to find the entrance to the underground ritual room, but the tunnel was packed tight with debris.

“Should we dig it out?” Humphrey asked.

“No,” Henrietta said. “If we did it fast, what’s left of the house would collapse on us. If we went carefully, it would take too long and might collapse anyway.”

“There’s another entrance,” Jason said. “It’s bit of a crawl through a tight, wet tunnel. Which is at the bottom of a well. After that, though, it’s just a subterranean cave with a walkway and you’re there.”

“I don’t think we need to go that far,” Henrietta said.

“Perhaps we should be thorough,” Humphrey said.

“Agreed,” Jason said.

“Alright, we’ll compromise,” Henrietta said. “I’ll sweep my aura senses from above through that cave system. It should be between here and the centre of the maze, right?”

“I can put us right over it, using my map,” Jason said. “Maybe we should actually go down and take a look, though.”

“By crawling through a wet tunnel at the bottom of a well?” Neil said. “If there were still cultists here, then they would have killed the people who came to burn this place down. Or left, if it happened before they came back.”

“It does seem worthless as a place to hole up,” Clive said. “Without the manor, it’s just a place they’ve been known to use in the past. That makes it all threat and no value. Even if they came here, they would have moved on.”

“That does make sense,” Humphrey acknowledged.

“Still, I’ll do the aura sweep, just to be thorough,” Henrietta said. “We don’t want to go regretting it later.”

From within the edge of the estate grounds, Timos and Zato watched the skimmer disappear into the distance.

“Consider this a formal apology,” Zato said. “I thought your ideas were overwrought. Burning down the manor and moving everyone into the cave. Using so many of our

resources setting up the aura suppression. You protected our final chance. Even if we killed them, more would come looking.”

“Our work here will take months,” Timos said. “I knew someone would come, eventually. I remained hidden in Greenstone for so long because I was more careful and more thorough than anyone believed I had reason to be. If the leadership hadn’t felt Thadwick was worth risking exposure, I’d be hidden there still.”

“You’ve made a believer out of me,” Zato said. “You’re in charge of keeping us secure. Whatever measures you think necessary, take them. So long as it doesn’t compromise the work.”

The team moved south from the Vane Estate, following the direction, but not the path Jason had once taken to the Mistrun River. The direct route they had taken at that time had required most of a week on foot. The team anticipated taking about the same amount of time because of their zig-zag route that would visit all the local towns and villages, with all the time it would take to clear off their adventure boards.

The skimmer garnered attention as it arrived in the North-East Quarry Village Number Four. Such a magical conveyance was only ever used by adventurers or big shots coming to check out the quarry operations, so the villagers immediately knew that important visitors had come.

The village was situated in a ring around a lake fed by a channel leading from the nearby mountain that was the site of the quarries. A waterfall sprayed out of a hole in the mountainside, feeding the channel.

“I was sprayed out of the mountain by that waterfall,” Jason said, pointing it out.

“Why would you jump into that spray?” Sophie asked.

“I was up there taking a look when it turned off,” Jason said. “Me and another bloke were taking a look when it turned back on.

“It’s fed by an aperture, right?” Henrietta asked.

“That’s right,” Jason said.

“There were a number of instances of the aperture’s being interrupted,” Clive said. “It was the whole reason the expedition was formed in the first place. That must have been one of the earliest incidents. What happened, exactly?”

“I was standing right next to the stream when it stopped. The caretaker and I went for a closer look and a shab came through. It was my first iron-rank monster. We killed it, and then the water turned back on. It threw me, the other guy and a bunch of extra shabs right off the side of the mountain. It was kind of awesome, actually. Most of the shabs died

when they hit the ground, but a few survived by landing in the water, although they still took a good hit from that height. Rufus, Gary and Farrah were off chasing the guy that set them up for the blood cult, so me, the other guy and Colin finished the shabs off.”

Their arrival having been noticed, the mayor was soon hurrying out to greet them.

“Jason? Jason Asano?”

“G’day, Greg,” Jason said, shaking the mayor’s hand. He looked Jason up and down, taking in the dark combat robes, a sword on one hip and a dagger on the other, his bandolier full of throwing darts.

“Look at you, all intimidating,” Greg said. “Every inch the successful adventurer.”

“I wouldn’t rush to conclusions,” Jason said. “I’m the reason my team got stuck with punishment detail.”

“Yes, I do recall your friend mentioning you would be by soon enough. Are they doing well?”

Jason forced himself to keep the easy smile on his face as he recalled Farrah’s flippant remark.

“Let me introduce you to some new friends,” he said, giving Greg all their names.

“Geller?” Greg asked. “As in…”

“No, not those Gellers,” Jason said. “These two are from the other Geller family. Very big in the peat trade. As the saying goes, if you want to find a Geller, look in that disgusting peat bog. These are some of the first to go into adventuring. Not the actual first, though. It was a shame about the others. Such an undignified way to die.”

Henrietta watched Jason from under raised eyebrows as Neil shook his head. Humphrey took it in stride, also shaking the mayor’s hand. Greg led them into the village, along the ring road that circled the lake. They drew a lot of attention, some people coming up and greeting Jason by name.

“My daughter still has that spirit coin you gave her when you had her run from the monsters. She keeps it in a box like a treasure.”

Jason would share a few words before they let let the intimidating cluster of adventurers move on.

“Dan,” Jason greeted one man. “We’ll have to get some of that grilled giant worm.”

“Not this time of year,” Dan said as he shook Jason’s hand. “We don’t take them during their breeding season. I can do you a steamed pockmark lizard, if you like.”

“Sounds terrible,” Jason said. “I’m in.”

“I don’t get it,” Neil said as they made their way to the adventure notice board. “You were here for what? A couple of days, half a year ago?”

“It was three, I think,” Jason said.

“How do you know all these people?”

“You aristocrats are all about dignity and status,” Clive said. “We regular folk appreciate someone who doesn’t climb up on their high horse. And say what you will about Jason, it’s clear that if he was ever on a high horse, he fell off.”

The team found the adventure board notices and Henrietta looked them over.

“There’s nothing impressive here,” she said. “If you like, Asano, you can stay here while the rest of us handle these and pick you up after. You seem to have some catching up to do.”

“That would be nice,” Jason said. “I can call in on an old friend.”

“Three days, six months ago,” Neil said again. “How do you have old friends?”

“The Magic Society have actually been looking into it,” Jason said. “It turns out that once you cross a certain charisma threshold, it starts warping reality around you.”

“Just to be clear,” Clive said, “The Magic Society has not been doing that.”

Jason was sitting in the yard of Hiram, the caretaker of the local astral space aperture. They had been thrown off the mountain and fought the monsters that emerged from it together. His home faced onto the lake, where his granddaughter splashed about with some of the neighbours’ children.

“Things here have been just fine,” Hiram said. “I want to hear all about your exciting adventures.”

“I might have had a close call or two,” Jason said. “There was actually something of a contest for adventurers that...”

Jason trailed off as rainbow light started shining from the middle of the lake. He leapt out of the lounge, stern gaze locked onto that light. It was growing rapidly, to a size indicating a bronze, or possibly even silver manifestation.

“What is it with this village? Hiram, you need to evacuate. Everyone, the whole village. If you have some kind of shelter, put them in it. Otherwise, just get everyone as far away as you can.”

“How long before it finishes manifesting?” Hiram asked.

“If it’s bronze-rank,” Jason said, “maybe quarter of an hour. I can probably handle that, though. If it’s silver you have twice as long, but there won’t be anything I can do.”

Hiram nodded and headed for the children who had stopped playing and were looking at the beautiful rainbow vortex.

Chapter 202

Swat

Jason extended his shadow arm to the roof of Hiram's house as his shadow cloak appeared around him. He reduced his weight and retracted the arm, pulling himself lightly onto the roof. He looked around the village and saw people scrambling to get their families and go. They knew what a monster manifestation meant and none of them had seen anything as large as the rainbow vortex now shining over the surface of the lake.

The rest of his team was out of voice communication range. They would be back some time in the next few hours, depending on how long it took them to chase down the monsters they were hunting.

Jason turned his grim gaze back to the vortex. It was definitely going to be silver rank, which gave the villagers more time, but it wouldn't be enough. There was no way to evacuate the whole village in half an hour, not with children and the elderly. Someone was going to have to buy them time and the only person on hand was him.

He had no illusions of defeating a silver-rank monster. He was confident against a bronze-ranked one, even a bronze-rank essence user, if they were of the mediocre variety that inhabited Greenstone's lower rungs. A silver-ranked monster, though, was not something he could beat. Even with his powers to reduce the resistances of an enemy, his afflictions would spatter off anything silver-rank like rain off an umbrella.

Essence users advanced in a well-rounded manner, with all their attributes going up with rank. Even if they had no powers to boost them, every essence user would be faster and stronger than they were at the rank before. Monsters did not conform to that balance. Some were fast, some were strong; others were physically weak yet possessed potent magical powers. Jason needed the silver rank monster to be big and slow, just as he normally preferred.

If it was big and slow, there was a good chance he could kite the monster away from the villagers. If it was fast, or had some strange powers, it might well kill Jason in moments before rampaging through the fleeing villagers. Jason watched and waited, knowing that life or death for himself and hundreds of others was just a matter of fortune.

This was the third magic manifestation Jason had witnessed, after the awakening stone and the other silver rank monster. Silver-rank monsters were rare in the low magic region, yet he had been close to two of them manifesting in a month. It was possible the monster surge was imminent after all.

He had been told that no two manifestations happened exactly the same way, although he was having trouble getting excited for it, with his mind dwelling on his likely imminent death. Eventually, the rainbow vortex started to shrink, coalescing into a sphere that grew brighter and brighter, until Jason had to shield his eyes against it. He could see the village washed in blue light, as if a cerulean sun had appeared over the lake. Then the light dimmed and he was able to look again. He watched the sphere of blue light drop into the water and vanish.

There was an odd stillness from Jason's perspective, although in the distance he could still see villagers scrambling to flee. The light show had done nothing to allay their fears. Around Jason, though, all was quiet.

The moment passed as a humungous plume of water erupted from the lake, geysering into the air like a bomb went off in the depths. Waves rippled outward, rocking the boats tied up at jetties along the shore. Lake water fell like rain and Jason feared a repeat of what happened in the city with the small army of elementals.

Jason strained his aura senses at every pool and puddle that was forming, looking for manifesting elementals. He found the water seemed blessedly inert, aside from the single silver-rank aura bulging out from the centre of the lake. His eyes tracked to the very centre of the lake, where not all the water had fallen back down. Some had taken the form of an elemental, standing on the surface of the lake.

The elemental was unlike the formless blobs he had seen in the past. It resembled a statue, carved from water and filled with chunks of rock floating through its liquid body. It looked like a person, an armoured woman with greaves, breastplate and helmet, even a shield in one hand. In the other was a long whip, trailing from her grip down to the lake. The whip was filled with what looked like razor sharp stones along its length.

Quest: [Evacuation]

The villagers of North east Quarry Village Number Four need time to get their people away from the monster that appeared in their midst. You are all that stands between them and a quick death.

- Objective: Delay [Oasis Tyrant] until the villagers escape or help arrives.
 - Reward: [Amulet of the Dark Guardian].
-

Jason let out a breath, realising that all the news was good. Normally an elemental was a bad matchup for him, but anything at silver-rank was as immune to his afflictions as

an elemental anyway. Elementals of the water and earth variety were not known for speed, which was the province of wind and fire types. Most importantly, it was alone. It would be powerful, but all he had to do was distract the one monster for as long as the villagers took to get away.

If he could keep it from going after the villagers until they were gone, then that would be a win. If he could do it long enough for the others to get back, it would be a triumph. Henrietta was the only one who would have the power to fight the monster and even that would be no easy fight.

Jason called out Shade and Gordon. Colin would be most useful remaining in his bloodstream, healing the injuries Jason would inevitably be taking.

“Shade, I’ll be relying on you for movement. One of you stays with me, keep your other bodies where I can jump to them at need. The villagers are escaping to the north, so we’ll start by heading south. We’ll use the building ringing the lake for cover and slowly work our way around. By the time we reach where the villagers are now, they should be gone. Gordon, stick with me. When I shadow jump, catch up as quick as you can.”

Jason drew his sword and looked at the elemental. Despite not having eyes, it was turning its head as if panning its gaze around the village.

“Gordon, grab its attention.”

Twin beams blasting out from the eyes orbiting the avatar of doom signalled the beginning of the fight. The elemental, standing on the surface of the lake, turned its gaze from the village to hone in on Gordon.

The elemental was a towering figure, three times the height of the house Jason was standing on. Just as he had hoped, it’s steps were slow and ponderous, even though it walked over the surface of the water as if it weighed nothing. Once it drew closer, however, Jason discovered he hadn’t gotten off as lightly as he believed. The elemental flicked its tree trunk-thick whip of water and razor rocks in Jason’s direction.

The elemental might have been slow but the whip was not. Jason barely had time to leap off the roof before the whip smashed through the front wall of Hiram’s house. As it yanked the whip back again, the roof was torn in half, what was left collapsing into the interior.

Gordon had followed Jason from Hiram’s rooftop to that of the next cottage by turning into a nebula cloud of blue and orange energy. In could form he made a rapid dash through the air before returning to his normal state. Jason was able to make such a huge leap to the next rooftop because of the jumping magic on his boots. At that moment, he

was sending a silent blessing in the direction of the Bert brothers, Gilbert and Filbert, who had found them for him.

The fight between Jason and the elemental was not a fight at all. It was a cat and mouse game, a housekeeper swatting at a skittering bug. Gordon would emerge from between a pair of buildings and fire beams at the elemental. Jason would use that distraction to extend his shadow arm and land a blow with his sword, striking at the whip.

While the elemental used it as if it were a separate weapon, it was part of the elemental itself. It didn't really matter, since the sword was all but harmless. The goal was to hold the elemental's attention. After attacking, Jason would vanish into Shade before Shade himself flickered away like the shadow of a cloud.

The game was not an easy one. Because the whip was an animate part of the elemental, it was not bound by the motion of an actual whip. It lashed and flailed, snaked and sought in pursuit of its elusive prey. As Jason and Gordon hid amongst the trees and garden, homes and shops, the passage of the whip devastated them all. Cottages were smashed to rubble, trees slapped right out of the ground in the attempt to swat down Jason and his familiars.

Jason ducked amongst the trees and buildings, sprinting, leaping, teleporting. It was close call after close call as the whip snaked around or smashed right through the obstructions he was using as cover. He was continually forced to find new ground to hide in as the monster smashed its way around the village in a circle. He realised that he was burning through village faster than the villagers could evacuate it. The contest was not just whether Jason could survive, but whether the villagers could evacuate while there was village to evacuate from.

From his first day of training, Gary had been hammering movement skills into Jason, and Sophie had taught him even more. She seemed to have a preternatural sense for motion, helping him incorporate each new power in efficient, innovative ways. All that training and practise was showing its value as he was pushed to the limit of his abilities and beyond.

In the crucible of action he was pulling off wild stunts he had barely learned for the simple reason that he had to. He wasn't even sure he had adrenaline anymore, but it felt his whole body was flush with it. He would leapt up high, floating with his cloak as he tugged himself through the air by gripping a tree or building with his shadow arm. It allowed him to air dodge the crashing whip as it tried to slap him into the ground.

He dashed wildly through the increasingly ruined village, retaliating only enough to make sure the elemental kept coming after him. The pinpricks of his sword weren't truly hurting it but seemed to annoy and frustrate as it became more wild in thrashing the whip.

Gordon was a loyal companion, following Jason's wild rush through the ruins of the once-beautiful village. Gordon's normal form was not swift, so he spent more time in his rapid, nebulous cloud form than not. Meanwhile, Shade was constantly repositioning his bodies to give Jason places to teleport to.

One of Shade's bodies was the first casualty, left behind as Jason barely teleported through it in time. The whip did not have any inherent power to affect incorporeal objects, but the silver-rank monster was so infused with magic that it ripped apart the iron-rank familiar.

Gordon was the second casualty. His cloud dash was fast but his reflexes were otherwise sluggish. He took one glancing hit, then a second, before a square blow slapped him into nothingness, his vessel dissipating entirely.

Jason was increasingly feeling the pressure. Losing one of the Shades hampered his mobility and he no longer had Gordon as a secondary distraction. When he had the chance he glanced to the evacuating villagers, confirming his fears that he wasn't buying enough time. The village was being wrecked faster than they could vacate it, the destruction moving closer and closer to their evacuation point. Just as despair began to well up, he received blessed relief.

-
- Contact [Clive Standish] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Henrietta Geller] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Sophie Wexler] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Belinda Callahan] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Neil Davone] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Humphrey Geller] has entered communication range.
-

"HELP!" he screamed through the voice chat. "SILVER-RANK MONSTER!"

Henrietta's voice came back through the voice chat in a stream of expletives.

"She means we're on our way," Humphrey said. "How long do you think you can hold out?"

"Frankly, I'm surprised I lasted this..." Jason said before cutting himself off to duck under a sweeping whip strike that shattered the wall behind him and showered him in debris.

"If you could hear extraneous sounds," Jason said as he sprinted off, "you would have just heard a house collapse. Can't really talk."

“Stay sharp and stay alive, Asano,” Henrietta said. “We’re on our way.”

Renewed hope filled Jason with fresh determination. The villagers needed him to keep the monster away from them and he was running out of village, so he was forced to stay longer in the already-wrecked sections where the cover wasn’t as plentiful and the elemental could more easily track his movements. He took greater risks and more desperate chances. Finally, one of the increasingly close calls was too close and the whip found its mark.

It was little more than a glancing blow but Jason felt like he’d been hit by a truck, his body skipping like a stone across the ground before crashing into a wall. Barely able to move, he reached down and took a vial from his potion belt. The enchantment on the belt protecting them from incidental damage was one of his oldest items and he silently thanked Gary for insisting he buy it. Thumbing the stopper from the vial, he tipped it down his throat.

Item: [Lesser Miracle Potion] (iron rank, legendary)

Salvation in a bottle (consumable, potion).

- **Effect:** Fully restore health, mana and stamina. This potion is only effective on normal and iron-rank individuals. The magic of this potion lingers in the body longer than normal potions, preventing additional healing and recovery items from being effective for a longer period.

Jason experienced a sensation unlike anything he had ever felt. Power, strength and vitality were a raging river, crashing through his body. It was performing at a packed-out arena; winning a grand final. It was being born while having an orgasm. He vaulted to his feet, ignoring the rents in his combat robes. The whip was coming in to finish the job, but he suddenly felt like he could beat the elemental single-handed.

Fortunately, that delusion passed quickly and he got out of the way. His shadow hand snaked out, much like the whip that was chasing him, to snatch up his dropped sword and continue the fight.

Over the course of the chase, Jason had landed many hits with his sword and built up considerable charges of extra force damage. He estimated it was more than any previous encounter, yet the iron-rank weapon took no more than thumbnail-sized divots out of the silver-rank elemental.

Jason continued his mad dash, buying as much time as he could as his situation deteriorated. Shade’s second body was destroyed, then his third. In Shade’s absence he was conjuring and re-conjuring his cloak as he teleported through it to any shadow he

could see. The reinvigorating effect of the potion was spent as he burned through stamina and mana both, riding more and more on the edge. Hiding had become a constant state of evasion, his body riddled with cuts from debris smashed into flying shards. He no longer had time to check on the villagers, or try and slow down the destruction of their village.

The end came when he sensed a bundle of new auras approaching. He recognised his team and let out a weary laugh. That moment's distraction proved costly as the whip slammed into him. A stone shard within the whip tore across his torso as it sent him careening through the air. He was already unconscious when he hit a wall like a bug on a windshield.

Chapter 203

The Purpose of the Adventure Society

Jason returned to consciousness to find a small face looking down at him.

“GRANDPA!” she yelled at a brain-rattling volume. “He’s awake!”

“He’s also a little delicate,” Jason croaked as Hiram’s granddaughter skipped off to find her grandfather.

He brushed aside the system messages for the moment to push himself into a sitting position and look around. He was in one of the cottages in the village from the looks of it, but not Hiram’s. That had been the first one destroyed under the whip that swept through the village like a wrecking ball. The bed he was laying on was in a small bedroom, with a large open window letting in pleasant fresh air.

As he was glancing around, Hiram made his way into the room, along with Humphrey and Neil. Neil pushed his way to the front and started examining Jason by pulling a crystal from his dimensional satchel and waving it over Jason.

Jason looked down as he did, spotting a scar running from his right hip to the middle of his torso on the other side. Neil spotted his gaze.

“Nothing I can do about that,” Neil said. “Soul scar. Physically, you’re fine, just very depleted. Don’t go trying to rush your recovery with stamina and mana potions, though. You’ve been asleep for four days, so take it slow.”

“Four days?”

“I’m not sure you realise how close to death you came,” Neil said. “We almost fed you a lesser miracle potion before I checked for potion toxicity and realised you were still getting over one. The state you were in, another one would have finished you off. If it weren’t for your outworlder body and that familiar inside you, I doubt you’d have lived long enough for my healing to take effect.”

“Thanks, Neil,” Jason said. “And thanks to you too, Colin. What about the monster?”

“Henrietta took care of it,” Humphrey said. “It wasn’t easy, though. She lost a couple of her familiars and had to resummon them after.”

“I did too,” Jason said. “I’ll need to get the materials, though. I only have the bronze-rank equivalent I bought for when I rank up.”

He swung his feet off the bed and held out a hand. Humphrey took it and helped him to his feet, supporting him when he staggered.

“Take it easy,” Neil said. “You’re still recovering from all that healing. We’re not going anywhere for at least another day while you recover. I’m guessing you’re hungry?”

“Yeah, now you say it.”

“Spirit coins, one every hour or so to replenish your reserves. No food for at least a day.”

“How flexible is the no food thing.”

“Not flexible at all,” Neil said. “Normally I’d tell you that if you want to mess up your recovery, that’s your business, but you’re part of this team. We have to rely on you, so get it right.”

Jason gave Neil a grateful smile.

“Alright, mate. The food stays stashed in my storage space for now.”

“You don’t have to go that far,” Neil said. “The rest of us can eat food while you watch and suck on a spirit coin.”

“Oh, that’s cold.”

“How are you feeling?” Neil asked.

“Tingly. Weak.”

Jason looked himself up and down. He was wearing only the silk boxer shorts he’d had on when he was knocked unconscious. The combat robes and underclothes were gone, as was the blood and sweat he was certain had stained them during the fight. Someone had clearly stripped him down and tipped some crystal wash over him.

“That’s normal,” Neil said. “As long as you keep eating spirit coins and focus on rest, you’ll be back to full strength in a day or two. I’d recommend using the time to meditate.”

Jason spotted his combat robe on a wall hanger, dangling from a peg. Like him, four days had been enough for it to recover as the self-repair magic restored it to pristine condition. Also like him, it had been cleaned.

“Thank you for what you did,” Hiram said as Jason took the robe and placed it into his inventory.

“Was it enough?” Jason asked as dark mist appeared around his body, obscuring him for a moment before disappearing, revealing Jason changed into casual clothes. “Did everyone get away?”

“There was a lot of debris flying around, even at a distance,” Hiram said. “There were a lot of cuts and scrapes, but your team’s healer saw to everyone after he had you settled. Hard worker, that one. We did lose a pair of elderly people. Their family were out of the village and with everyone in a mad panic, no one checked on them.”

Jason hung his head. “I’m sorry, Hiram.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” Hiram admonished. “Nothing at all. Do not even try and apologise after fighting a monster like that.”

"I wouldn't call it a fight," Jason said. "More like a mad scramble to not die."

"You did better than anyone had any right to expect," Humphrey said. "Not many iron-rankers would have even tried what you did."

"You would have done it," Jason said.

"I wouldn't," Neil volunteered. "I'd have run as fast as I could while complaining I didn't have powers to run faster."

"I get that," Jason said with a chuckle. "That's pretty much what I did."

Jason took out an iron spirit coin and slipped it into his mouth. He grimaced at the ozone taste.

"Good boy," Neil said and Jason groaned in complaint.

"Feel ready to go out?" Hiram asked. "There's a lot of people waiting to thank you."

"No thanks," Jason said. "Let Belinda turn into me and they can thank her."

"If you're going to run around playing hero," Neil said, "you'll have to accept people treating you like one."

"What Neil means is that the people here want to show you their gratitude," Henrietta said, walking into the room. "Part of the job is to let them. They need to know that the Adventure Society will be there when they need it most. The purpose of the Adventure Society, after all, is to let people live, without living in fear."

She glanced at her brother, then turned back to Jason.

"Our family has certain views on what makes a real adventurer", she said. "A lot of adventurers get caught up in the money and power of what we do and put aside the responsibility. You're a real adventurer, Asano, and let no one tell you differently. How are you, by the way."

"He's as well as can be expected," Neil said. "He's still a day or two from getting back on the road, though."

"Can't he rest sitting in the skimmer?" Henrietta asked.

"It would be better if he has the freedom to walk about a bit and the peace to meditate without the skimmer's air intake roaring behind him."

"Alright," Henrietta said. "Are you ready to go out and meet with people, Asano? You might as well get it over with."

"No, I'd like a little time to gather myself. I'll be out in a minute."

The others shuffled out of the small room and Jason sat back on the bed, turning his attention to the system messages he had banished to the periphery of his vision.

Quest: [Evacuation]

- Objective complete: Delay [Oasis Tyrant] until the villagers escape or help arrives.
- Quest complete.
- 100 [Silver Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
- 1,000 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
- 10,000 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
- [Amulet of the Dark Guardian] has been added to your inventory.

Jason took the item reward from his inventory. It hung on a chain made of intricate links of carved obsidian. The amulet itself depicted a replica of Jason's personal crest, a cloak filled with daylight sky, surrounded by the night.

Item: [Amulet of the Dark Guardian] (growth, iron rank, legendary)

A protective amulet with the power of a shadowy guardian (jewellery, necklace).

- This item is bound to you and cannot be used by anyone else.
- Effect: For each instance of an affliction applied to an enemy, gain an instance of [Guardian's Blessing]. You may bestow all instances of [Guardian's Blessing] upon another person by touch.
- [Guardian's Blessing] (boon, holy): Instances are consumed to absorb damage from any source. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. For each instance consumed, gain an instance of [Blessing's Bounty].
- [Blessing's Bounty] (heal-over-time, holy, stacking): Heal over time. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

Growth Conditions (bronze):

- Bound user must be at least bronze rank.
- 100 bronze-rank barrier quintessence gems.
- 100 bronze-rank renewal quintessence gems.
- 100 bronze-rank balance quintessence gems.
- 100 bronze-rank malign quintessence gems.
- 1000 bronze rank spirit coins.
- Ritual of bronze ascension.

Jason clasped the chain behind his neck, slipping the amulet under his clothes.

"I think you and I are going to get along just fine."

It did mean more materials he had to buy, however. He had blown most of his money on getting materials ready for bronze rank, plus the resources he had been literally pouring into the cloud flask. He had brought two sets of bronze-rank summoning materials for each

of his familiars, in case their vessels were destroyed, but he hadn't expected it to happen while he was still iron rank. Replacing the materials to resummon Shade would be bearable, but even the iron rank materials for Gordon were onerous.

Fortunately, the quest had given him a monetary haul, which should put a dent in his costs. He also had the loot from the elemental. Neil had used his own looting power on it after Henrietta defeated it. The team decided that Jason and Henrietta should split the loot, as both had expensive summoning rituals to perform as a direct result. Along with the spirit coins, Henrietta had laid claim to a magical bronze-rank whip made of water filled with razor-sharp stones. Jason received an epic-rarity discord essence.

He turned to the other system message.

New Title: [Resolute]

- The damage you suffered in your stand against a much more powerful enemy has marked your soul. Your resistance to the suppressive force of higher-ranked auras is increased.
- Your aura signature has changed. Your unflinching resolve can be detected if your aura is examined by an aura sensing power or when projecting your aura.

Jason unbuttoned his shirt and traced his fingers along the scar, from his right hip, across his abdomen and curving a little way around the left side of his torso. It was strange to see a scar that looked healed, yet he had only found there minutes before.

Once again, he had edged right up to death. The more his powers grew, the greater the dangers he faced. This time has been a greater escalation than he had been looking for, though. He thought back to those moments when he was waiting for the monster to manifest, unsure if he would live or die.

In the end, he was lucky with the monster that appeared. Too many times it had been luck that kept him alive. From the beginning, he had become an adventure to seize control of his own fate. He had to get stronger, strong enough to face any challenge. He stood up, his face full of steely resolve. Then he got dizzy and sat down again, before getting up more slowly.

The waterfall sprayed out of the mountain, falling into the pool at the base, flowing into the channel that fed the lake around which the village was built. The force of the water sent it tumbling through the air instead of washing down the cliff face, leaving a space under waterfall at the base of the cliff. It was a favourite play area of the village children,

jumping from the rocks into the pool. They were all strong swimmers, which was an oddity for children of the desert.

None of the children were present, most of the families having already left the village. Those still present weren't letting their children out of their sight. With only a handful of homes left, most of the villagers had already headed for the fortified town where the regional villages waited out monster surges. Jason had visited that town himself, once, where Rufus had introduced him to the adventuring boards.

The remaining villagers occupied the small cluster of intact buildings. Leaving a small bedroom to Jason alone was a grand accommodation, in the circumstances. They had never intended to stay the night, so Jason had not set up his cloud house before the fight.

Quarry operations would not be resuming until the village was once again in a state to support them. Those that stayed behind were the mayor, the quarry operations manager and the other town leaders who were planning out the reconstruction of the village. Their plans were very up in the air, however, with the uncertainty surrounding the overdue monster surge.

Jason's experiences made him more comfortable with people being annoyed, confused or both than with sincere displays of gratitude. He did a lot of smiling and handshaking, while in his head he was waiting for a shoe that never dropped. Eventually Henrietta rescued him, telling the people that he needed more rest. Hiram quietly suggested the spot by the mountain, knowing Jason was going to go off and meditate.

He sat alone on a wet rock, meditating as errant waterfall spray splashed him with pleasant coolness. He let his mind drift and the weariness of his body fade away. Periodically he would emerge from a trance state, slip a spirit coin into his mouth and then resume meditation.

System messages appeared periodically, which he ignored until he felt a wellspring of power building up, filling his chest with an uncomfortable pressure. He coughed up phlegm speckled with blood, which splashed into the water. Blue grey light started to shine from within his body.

-
- Ability [Hand of the Reaper] (Dark) has reached Iron 2 (100%).
 - Ability [Hand of the Reaper] (Dark) has reached Iron 3 (00%).

 - All [Dark Essence] abilities have reached [Iron 3].
 - Linked attribute [Speed] has increased from [Iron 0] to [Iron 3].

 - Progress to bronze rank: 50% (4/4 essences complete).
-

Many of Jason's most advanced abilities had finally seen real movement in the wake of the fight, including the Midnight Eyes power which, in spite of barely being used, was within grasping distance of becoming Jason's first bronze rank power.

The sun was going down and it was time to return to the village where he had set up the cloud house. Before he left, though, he opened up his character sheet to look at his progress.

Jason Asano

Attributes

- [Power] (Blood): [Iron 7].
- [Speed] (Dark): [Iron 3].
- [Spirit] (Doom): [Iron 3].
- [Recovery] (Sin): [Iron 7].

Essences (4/4)

Dark [Speed] (5/5)

- [Midnight Eyes] (special ability): [Iron 9] 99%.
- [Cloak of Night] (special ability): [Iron 9] 12%.
- [Path of Shadows] (special ability): [Iron 8] 41%.
- [Hand of the Reaper] (special ability): [Iron 3] 00%.
- [Shadow of the Reaper] (familiar): [Iron 3] 09%.

Blood [Power] (5/5)

- [Blood Harvest] (spell): [Iron 7] 41%.
- [Leech Bite] (special attack): [Iron 8] 14%.
- [Feast of Blood] (spell): [Iron 7] 02%.
- [Sanguine Horror] (familiar): [Iron 8] 89%.
- [Haemorrhage] (spell): [Iron 8] 92%.

Sin [Recovery] (5/5)

- [Punish] (special attack): [Iron 8] 45%.
- [Feast of Absolution] (spell): [Iron 7] 63%.
- [Sin Eater] (special ability): [Iron 7] 69%.
- [Hegemony] (aura): [Iron 9] 18%.
- [Castigate] (spell): [Iron 7] 88%.

Doom [Spirit] (5/5)

- [Inexorable Doom] (spell): [Iron 8] 97%.
 - [Punition] (spell): [Iron 8] 24%.
 - [Blade of Doom] (spell): [Iron 8] 26%.
 - [Verdict] (spell): [Iron 6] 94%.
 - [Avatar of Doom] (familiar): [Iron 3] 12%.
-

He was now well and truly on the path to bronze. His newest powers hadn't been increasing much during training but the regular hunts as they travelled around, clearing adventure notices had seen a surge. By the time they reached the heights of his older powers, it would probably take bronze-rank monsters to really push him over the line in anything like timely fashion.

He got up and meandered back into the village, walking barefoot across the lush grass that grew alongside the channel, in defiance of the desert surrounds. He was struck again by the destruction visited upon the village. If the sudden preponderance of silver-rank monsters was any indication, he would have all the monsters he needed to rank up in the very near future.

Chapter 204

Elven Storage Solutions

The cloud house had taken the form of a large two-storey building of desert stone. Jason found Clive and Belinda out front, working on the scattered collection of parts that used to be the skimmer. After getting Jason's cry for help over voice chat, Clive had used a quick and dirty ritual to overcharge the skimmer. It had brought them to village in the nick of time, but also taken a toll on the vehicle. While Jason recovered, he and Belinda had been trying to repair it using the random collection of materials he happened to have in his storage space.

"How's it going?" Jason asked.

"We've figured out something that should last us the rest of the trip," Clive said. "It'll put all the burden on the parts that are still good, though."

"Which means the skimmer will be well and truly done by the time we get to the river," Belinda added. "It might not even make it, depending on how much chasing around after monster notices we do."

"We'll have it ready to go in the morning," Clive said.

"Jason, have you seen Sophie, yet?" Belinda asked.

"Not since I woke up," Jason said. "Was she looking for me for something?"

"No," Belinda said. "Just do me a favour and don't be too... you when you see her."

"Too me?"

"Yes," Belinda said. "You know what I'm talking about."

"I don't think he can help it," Clive said.

"Don't believe it," Belinda said. "He might seem all over the place, but it's a lot more deliberate than you think. I know a flim-flam man when I see one."

Jason flashed her a grin and went inside the house.

The team looked at the dark hole leading into the earthen bank. It was hard to think of it as a burrow when they could have driven the skimmer into it with room to spare.

Henrietta frowned at the dark opening, one of many they had spotted nearby.

"This one is dangerous," she said. "Dark hunters. Bronze rank, they appear in large numbers and like to dig themselves a warren of dark tunnels."

"I'll go," Jason said.

"I don't think going in there alone is a good idea," Henrietta said.

“Going with someone else would be more dangerous,” Jason said. “This is my kind of fight.”

A fight in the dark against powerful monsters was exactly what he needed to push his perception power over the edge. Humphrey and Clive, with their human advantage, had already reached bronze rank with their perception powers, gaining enhanced aura senses. Neil, who had been an essence user longer than Jason, had likewise reached bronze with his perception power. It gave him the ability to sense vulnerabilities in magical defences and detect injuries, both in allies and enemies.

“I’m not sure going into the dark all alone is a good strategy.”

“Going alone into the dark is my best strategy,” Jason said. “I’ve been practising fighting in various ways, this trip. Now it’s time to fight my way.”

Henrietta looked at Jason, seeing the usual whimsy absent from his expression. All that was there was confidence and determination.

“Very well,” she conceded. “I don’t want you to hesitate to call on us if it goes wrong, though. We’ve come close enough to losing you already.”

Jason walked forward, his cloak manifesting around him. As he went into the tunnels, stars on his cloak started floating into the air, turning pure darkness into dancing shadows. The rest of the team waited, with no indications of anything coming from the cave.

“Asano, are you alright?” Henrietta asked after a while.

“Yes,” Jason’s voice came back. “It’s about to begin.”

She concentrated on the hole in front of her, extending her aura senses.

“What is it?” Humphrey asked, seeing her focused gaze.

“Your aura senses are stronger now,” Henrietta told him. “Push them forward, into the caves.”

“You said dark hunters were good at concealing their auras,” Humphrey said.

“They are,” Henrietta said.

Humphrey did as he was told, concentrating his senses of the burrow entrance in front. Sophie and Clive did the same, using their own enhanced aura senses. It was hard to sense anything from within the warren, but they picked out an aura radiating fear and panic. It was coming closer, toward the burrow entrance directly in front of them.

A creature came stumbling out of the hole. It looked like a preying mantis the size of a Saint Bernard but with the stinger-tail and hard black exterior of a scorpion. It had lost a leg somewhere and was leaking dark fluids from beneath chitinous plates. From the darkness behind it came a cold voice.

“Mine is the judgement, and the judgement is death.”

Light shone down on the monster from nowhere, a glorious mix of silver, blue and gold. The beauty of it was belied by the effects of the transcendent energy that rapidly evaporated the monster into rainbow smoke. Jason didn't emerge from the hole, only the team members with bronze-rank aura senses catching a glimpse of his aura in the moment the spell was cast.

They spotted more monsters emerging from the other holes around them, evacuating their underground warren. The creatures ignored the adventurers as they skittered away as fast as their legs would carry them. Each was radiating an aura steeped in the same fear and panic as the first.

"That's odd," Henrietta said, frowning at the fleeing monsters.

"What is?" Humphrey asked.

"They're called dark hunters for a reason," Henrietta said. "I've never heard of them escaping into sunlight before."

Some of the monsters were faster than others, who were clearly impaired. The most damaged started dropping dead shortly after making the surface, while the others grew more and more sluggish over time until they too collapsed to the ground. Jason's exit from the warren was presaged by floating lights that returned to their place on his cloak as he emerged into the light.

He started making his way around the dead monsters, using his blood harvest power on all the bodies before looting them. He didn't need to refresh his mana any more after the first couple of monsters, but kept doing it to level his ability. Finally completing his rounds, he returned to the group as if he'd been out for a stroll, nodding at the skimmer.

"Shall we?"

It finally happened as Jason meditated on the roof of the cloud house. It began with a burning sensation behind the eyes, which became a sharp, twisting pain until it suddenly stopped.

-
- Ability [Midnight Eyes] (Dark) has reached Iron 9 (100%).
 - Ability [Midnight Eyes] (Dark) has reached Bronze 0 (00%).
 - Ability [Midnight Eyes] (Dark) has gained a new effect.

Ability: [Midnight Eyes] (Dark)

- Special ability (perception).
- Base cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
 - Effect (iron): See through darkness.
 - Effect (bronze): Sense magic.

 - Ability [Midnight Eyes] (Dark) cannot advance further until all attributes have reached bronze rank.
-

Jason's vision swam and he was struck with potent vertigo. He rolled forward from his meditative pose, onto to all fours for stability as the world felt like it was tipping and turning around him.

Jason senses were filled with strange new stimuli. He could smell something strange on the air, carrying a faint ozone tang like the aftertaste of a spirit coin. He could feel his necklace and amulet, like electricity against his skin but not at all painful. He took it out of his shirt and it visibly shimmered with power. The much weaker magic woven into his everyday clothes was much milder, but still visible.

He pushed himself back into a sitting position as the dizziness became manageable. Around him, even the ambient magic in their air had become perceptible. It wasn't just his sight, either. He could feel it like a breeze on his skin, smell and taste it in the air. Actual magic objects like his amulet and boots had what looked like a shimmering heat mirage on them. He conjured his cloak and dagger and was able to see the mana emerge from his body like a blue mist before coalescing into the conjured objects. They were similar to his magical items under his new senses but still noticeably different.

The cloud house underneath him was a vast well of magic, although his perception couldn't penetrate beyond the exterior. He carefully pushed himself up on his feet, still a little unsteady. His vision was swimming, like he was looking at the world through a fish bowl. He stood in place and focused on regaining his equilibrium.

Eventually his sense of balance settled. His eyesight got under control and he took stock of just how differently he was perceiving the world. He could sense subtle shifts in the ambient magic around him but it was all too new to make any sense out of it. He would need time to become acclimatised to all the new sensory input.

Once he was sure of his balance, he made his way to the edge of the roof. The cloud house was once again in the form of a two storey building of desert stone, the rooftop giving him a broad view of the desert vista. He dropped lightly off the side, his cloak allowing him to drift gently down.

He could feel the conjured object like it was part of him as he fed it the extra mana to reduce his weight. His new senses, however, suggested it was not his weight that was being changed as he sensed it affect not him, but a field around him. It explained how he was able to share the cloak's power with others and he wondered if the actual functionality was to somehow affect gravity.

He alighted on the ground next to Sophie, who was just coming out of the building.

"Are you alright?" she asked. "I could sense your aura up on the roof and it was all over the place. You aren't normally that sloppy."

"I finally had that bronze breakthrough," he said. "Probably not a big deal for the person who got their first power to bronze years ago. So, are you talking to me again now? Counting the time I was unconscious, this is the first thing you've said to me in a week."

She shifted her gaze, not meeting his eyes. It was a stark contrast from her normal mode of glaring at the world like it owed her money.

"It's kind of obvious that you're giving someone the silent treatment when you're riding around the desert together in a half broken-down skimmer," he said.

"I'm not avoiding you," she denied.

"That might have sounded more plausible if you weren't avoiding eye contact right in front of me when you said it."

She lifted her head to stare defiantly at him but he spotted the vulnerability behind her eyes. He gave her his best reassuring smile.

"How about you tell me what the issue is and we'll see what we can do."

She frowned hesitantly and he watched her body language draw back.

"They told you that you were almost fed a potion that would have killed you, right?" she asked, voice muted and reluctant.

"It rings a bell," Jason said. "I'd just came out of a four day healing coma, so my retention rate wasn't ideal."

"They didn't tell you it was me, though, did they?" she asked. "I was the one who rushed ahead. If your voice chat wasn't still up, if Neil hadn't realised what I was doing and called out for me to stop..."

Jason blinked a couple of times, then let out a chuckle.

"I almost killed you and you think it's funny?"

"It is now," Jason said. "If you'd actually killed me I imagine I'd view it differently. You rushed to my side, you say?"

"Rushed might be a strong word," she back-pedalled. "I suppose you could call it a brisk pace."

He grinned and laughed again.

“I think some humanity is started to show under that stony façade, Wexler. Celestinity? Is that a word? Look, I’ll take a reckless desire to help over cold indifference any day. Well, not any day. I can think of some scenarios where... it doesn’t matter. The point is, I’m glad you rushed to save me. Yes, it didn’t go as planned, but you learned for next time. Instead of taking a potion, pick up Neil and carry him.”

“What was that?” Neil’s voice came from inside. He wandered out of the building to join the pair.

“Nothing Neil,” Jason called back. “We’re just discussing strategies to render healing assistance when someone has already taken a potion.”

“Oh, alright,” Neil said, then clearly realised what must have prompted the situation as an awkward expression crossed his face. “Uh...”

“You can go, Neil,” Jason said.

“Thank you,” Neil said quickly and ducked back inside.

“Oh, Neil,” Jason called after him.

“Yeah?” Neil’s voice drifted back out.

“Is there any chance you could stitch handles into your clothes?”

“Handles?”

Sophie stifled a snort of laughter.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “One somewhere on the upper torso, maybe under one arm, and the other on the thigh. That should be a good balance.”

“Asano,” Neil said, “I have no idea what you’re up to, but the answer is no.”

“Probably for the best,” Jason confided quietly in Sophie. “I think some kind of ruck-sack situation would be better. You’ll be able to run faster with him slung over your back. One of those child-carrier backpacks, but sized for a super-ripped elf. No, you don’t want to carry that lot around. Do you have occy straps here? Never mind, Belinda can probably knock some out with that power she has for creating regular items. Do you know where she is?”

“Alright, seriously,” Neil said, coming back outside. “What are you two talking about?”

“We’re trying to find Belinda,” Jason said innocently. “You haven’t seen her, have you?”

Chapter 205

Disbanded

The criminal culture in Greenstone was in a state of extreme flux. The Builder cult purge had turned over every rock in Old City, exposing many criminal enterprises. That the cult had attached themselves to many such clandestine operations only made things worse. Old City's criminal leadership thrived on being ignored by the Island, but now the powerful Island factions had placed their attention aggressively on Old City.

For the crime lords known as the big three, the purge had brought about very different results. Adris Dorgan was on the rise in the wake of his daughter being revealed as Director of the Adventure Society. When she came through the subsequent inquiry still holding her position, Dorgan's place in the city hierarchy was solidified.

He gained a powerful shield against pressure from the ruling elite. There were also rumours that he was heavily involved in the more secretive elements of investigating the Builder cult's activities, obtaining powerful concessions for his trouble. Whatever the truth, his operations had somehow come out of the purge stronger than before.

Clarissa Ventress had been extremely quiet, even before the purge. In the summer she had been pushing into Cole Silva's territory, trying to seize as much territory as she could. The goal had been to capitalise on the chaos following the old patriarch's death but Ventress had suddenly halted all such efforts overnight.

Rumours abounded as to the reason, but Ventress and her organisation quietly managed their existing affairs until just over a week ago, when word spread that Ventress was dead. The circumstances of her demise were being closely contained by her people, with her former bodyguard, the leonid Darnell, stepping into her position.

The change in leadership seemed to have been completed without too much contention but the air of uncertainty remained, becoming a pall dangling over their operations. Despite the relatively smooth transition, Darnell's power was extremely unstable, especially coming in the wake of the purge. The unease spread through his territory and his people, making them vulnerable to outside forces. Oddly, Adris Dorgan had made no move to exploit this weakness and expand, despite his own solid position. Instead, it was Cole Silva who seized the opportunity.

Silva had experienced similar problems after seizing the reins his father had left behind and was still in the process of consolidating power. Many in his own organisation were unhappy with the changes he was making to how they operated and much of the old leadership were in the extended process of being pushed out.

The purge had hit Silva's operations hard. Cole had finally brought things under control by making sweeping changes. The old guard were excised and new avenues of operation were established. Unlike his father, Cole had pursued his ambitions with no concern for whom he worked with or what they worked on.

Interests his father had always avoided were suddenly on the table, brining in new sources of revenue and control. The lucrative nature of the new operations was the factor that allowed him to finally unite the organisation fully behind him.

Silva's lax approach to choosing partners to operate with allowed a number of Builder cult operations to embed themselves within his organisation. As a result, many of his rackets had been scoured by forces of the Duke, the Adventure Society and even a coalition of noble families, spearheaded by the Mercers.

Despite this, Silva was taking the chance to grab as much of the territory Clarissa Ventress once controlled as he could. It left him juggling a lot of balls at once and a personal project had been put aside. He had been willing to let one of those projects hibernate as the object of his attentions had left the city for an extended period. Now Silva had information that Asano was due to return, and he was taking time from his territorial ambitions to set new events into motion.

Silva left his office in the Fortress, gesturing at his bronze-ranker bodyguard to follow. Silva himself was a bronze-ranker but he had nothing in the way of combat skills. His taste in violence was to enact it upon those too powerless to fight back it and had raised his rank purely through the consumption of monster cores. His bodyguard was one of five other bronze-rankers currently in his employ, the most powerful and valuable members of his organisation.

The Fortress was neutral ground for the Big Three, each controlling their own sections. Silva made his way to an elevating platform which only he and his most trusted men could access. They descended into the bowels of the building, deep into the underground vaults built centuries ago to shield the citizens at the time from monsters.

Killian Laurent was waiting for him in a luxurious subterranean lounge Silva used for his most clandestine meetings. His father had the room set out in subdued décor, but Silva had redecorated, marking the organisation's most private sanctum as his own. On the walls, wood panelling had been painted black while the thick new carpet was a brazen red. The simple and elegant furniture his father had favoured was replaced with plush satin chairs and loungers. The simple recessed glow stone in the ceiling had been replaced with a resplendent chandelier. In place of the restrained, old art works that had adorned walls were bold images of sex, violence and power.

“Mr Silva,” Laurent greeted. The pallid elf got up from where he had been perched on the edge of a chair, waiting. “If you are ready, I will bring our first guest.”

“Why wasn’t he already waiting here?” Silva asked.

“With respect, Mr Silva, this is a man you wait on, not a man who waits on you.”

Silva’s face grimaced with anger but he gave a curt nod and Killian departed through another door from the one Silva had used. Silva had become increasingly intolerant of anyone who challenged his power as he scraped his father’s old guard from the top of the organisation. Silver-rankers were not to be trifled with, however. There were rumours that one of his guests had been dealing with Clarissa Ventress and had ultimately been the object of her demise.

Silva crashed into one of the soft armchairs, gesturing for his bodyguard to fix him a drink. The drinks cabinet was one of the few things in the room that remained from his father’s tenure.

“Bring the bottle, then wait outside.”

By the time Killian returned he was three drinks in, the spirits fuelling the perpetually burning furnace of rage and resentment inside him. The man Killian returned with was fully obscured under a robe. Silva’s aura senses stopped dead when they met it suggesting silver-rank concealment magic.

“I usually like to know who I’m dealing with,” Silva said.

“Our guest is a man who greatly values his anonymity,” Killian said.

“You may call me Mr Sparrow,” the hooded figure said. There was a slight reverb to his voice, indicating voice disguising magic. “You have my thanks for the accommodations you have made. The arrangements have been very satisfactory.”

“Please, sit,” Killian said, although he remained standing as Silva and Mr Sparrow sat down.

“I understand you are looking to have someone taken quickly and quietly,” Mr Sparrow said.

“That’s right,” Silva said. “I want him placed in my possession, but it must be done in utmost secrecy. He’s known to be slippery, resourceful and elusive, so I need someone who can strike quickly and definitively. I am told this is an area of specialty for you.”

“It is,” Sparrow said. “Utmost secrecy is my preferred method of conducting my affairs, so I believe we should be able to reach a mutually satisfactory arrangement. Who is the person you want taken?”

“An iron rank adventurer,” Silva said. “Jason Asano.”

Sparrow sat up straight in his chair.

“I’ve heard of this Asano; you make a difficult request. He has powerful friends that will come looking for him.”

“They won’t find him,” Killian said with confidence. “We have established a secure and isolated location and Asano himself has an ability that prevents him from being tracked. So long as he is taken cleanly, then he cannot be traced using his Adventure Society badge.”

“That’s an easy claim to make,” Sparrow said, “but harder to verify. I have no interest in being hunted down by gold-rankers because your information was bad.”

Killian looked to Silva, who nodded.

“We have another guest who can allay your suspicions,” Killian said. “I shall go bring him in.”

“I’m not accustomed to waiting on others,” Sparrow said, a twang of annoyance getting through the voice masking magic.

“My apologies, sir,” Killian said, “but for this man, you do.”

Silva smirked at Sparrow being told the same thing he had been earlier. Killian left the room and Silva poured himself another drink, not bothering to offer one to Sparrow. The pair sat in silence, Sparrow seemingly impassive under the dark hood as Silva stewed in the feeling of not being the most powerful man in the room.

That feeling reminded Silva unpleasantly of the time before his father died. His father’s chief people would look at him with disrespect, spreading rumours that the old man would not pass the mantle to his son. Sophie Wexler was meant to have been the symbol of him seizing power; the woman his father had always shielded from him, finally in his grasp. Instead, she had become a symbol of his impotence, flaunting herself in front of her new high society friends.

Her Adventure Society membership had placed her truly out of his reach. If an adventurer went looking for trouble in the criminal underworld and found a knife in his gut, the Adventure Society would pass it off as self-inflicted damage. If the criminal underworld went looking for adventurers, though, the Adventure Society would crash down on them like a tsunami. It meant that even if they used, killed and dumped Wexler’s body quickly enough, there would be too many threads leading back to him.

Instead he would have to make do with Asano, the man who had intervened to deny her to anyone. The inability to track Asano gave them an opportunity that they would not have with other adventurers. It was still dangerous, which is why he had been hesitant when his second guest had suggested it. That guest was being led into the room by an obsequious Killian, Silva and Sparrow both rising from their seats at the new arrival.

“Lucian Lamprey,” Sparrow said, his modulator failing to hide the surprise in his voice. Lamprey looked at the hooded figure and a smirk crossed his face.

“Hello, Lawrence,” Lamprey said. “Do say hello to your sister for me.”

Sparrow flinched but didn’t respond to Lamprey’s jibe.

“What’s your interest in this?” Sparrow asked instead.

“The boy has aggravated me,” Lamprey said. “Anyone with eyes can see that he’s the kind of vermin you need to squash before it grows to large to deal with.”

Sparrow turned to Silva.

“What do you need me for, if you already have a silver-ranker?” Sparrow asked.

“Because when Asano vanishes and is never seen again, it won’t be too long before someone asks me where I was at the time. I’m going to make sure I’m visible enough that I can round up people like cattle to give me an alibi. Also, he has some kind of communication power. I can take him down, but not before he gets word out. We need someone who can take him down clean before he knows what hit him. That’s your specialty.”

“You’re certain he can’t be traced?”

“Completely,” Lamprey said. “The problem with these low-rankers with the power to avoid tracking is that any kind magic strong enough to punch through it burns out the aura imprint it’s trying to track. By the time they get strong enough for the powers to work, the little pricks are strong enough that then their power shields them from it. The Magic Society has been trying to solve the problem for years so they can track Adventure Society badges better. That same annoyance, though, gives us an opportunity to take Asano that we wouldn’t have with another adventurer. Otherwise, we’d take the girl.”

“You seem confident,” Sparrow said.

“Yes,” Lamprey said. “You don’t have to worry about anyone finding anything at the scene. Even if you’re sloppy enough that people find out where you took him from, the Magic Society won’t find anything useful, I’ll see to that.”

Sparrow started pacing back and forth.

“If I’m going to do this,” he said, “Asano can never see the light of day again. He has to be dead and buried.”

“Forget buried,” Silva said gleefully. “He’s going to be dead and scattered across the delta in tiny pieces for wildlife to eat. Eventually, anyway. Once there isn’t enough flesh left on him to feel pain.”

“You are going to do this,” Lamprey told Sparrow. “You knew that from the moment you saw me walk through the door, Lawrence. All that’s left is to haggle the price.”

“The price has been paid to my satisfaction,” Sparrow said.

“And what is Silva paying you?” Lamprey asked. “Actually, don’t tell me. Your predilections are appalling even to me, and that’s saying something.”

“Asano is already overdue to return to the city,” Killian said. “He could be back at any time now.”

“He was caught up in a silver-rank manifestation,” Lamprey said.

“Another one?” Killian said, frowning. “If the monster surge is starting, that will complicate the site we’ve set up to hold Asano in.”

“It isn’t the monster surge,” Lamprey said. “These manifestations are just precursor signs. It could be months before the surge hits in full force.”

“Then we act?” Silva asked.

“Yes,” Lamprey said.

“Then I will need details,” Sparrow said. “Everything you have on Asano, and where you want me to bring him.”

Killian gave an unctuous smile.

“I have everything you need.”

Pantero’s Bakery in the Cavendish district of Old City was always busy. For Jason, however, both a regular customer and a young adventurer on the rise, service always came quick.

“You brought a lot today, Mr Asano.”

“My team just got back into town, Mrs Pantero. We’re having bit of a celebration.”

“How long does it take to visit a bakery?” Sophie complained, then shook her head. “Look who I’m talking about. I once saw him go through half a cart of apples looking for the perfect ones for a pie. They’re pie apples. They don’t have to be that good.”

The team were lounging on the deck of the cloud houseboat, returned to its spot at the marina. Jory had joined them, having spotted them passing the clinic just as he was closing up for the day. He was now nestled next to Belinda, the pair sharing a large cloud chair.

“He is taking a while,” Henrietta agreed.

“I bet he spotted some new food in the window of a shop,” Jory said. “I’ve learned better than to walk down certain streets with him. If he sees something new to eat, you’re lucky if he just buys it instead of finding his way to the kitchen.”

“Oh, gods, yes,” Clive said with a laugh. “I was showed him this dumpling soup place once – you know the one, Humphrey - and Jason got a job there for about a week. Jory, you’re lucky he hasn’t suborned your alchemy lab for some grand cooking experiment.”

“Has the alchemy association been hounding you about the miracle potion recipe?” Neil asked him.

Jory had gifted the team on their return with the first batch of lesser miracle potions his alchemy facility produced. It was a thank you for Jason giving him the funding to build the facility in the first place.

“They’ve been restricting themselves to fairly blatant hints that they’d like the formula,” Jory said. “Now that I have the church of the Healer backing me, they aren’t pushing. I suspect if the Healer hadn’t made the clinic sanctified ground, they would have broken in to steal it by now.”

Suddenly the whole team went deathly still.

“What is it?” Jory asked.

-
- Party leader [Jason Asano] has had his magical abilities suppressed.
 - Ability [Party Interface] has been negated.
 - Your party has been disbanded.
-