

Chapter 217

While They Watch Me Kill You

The town was little more than a cluster of stone and clay buildings along a single main street. It was not the better for its new residents, with unrepaired signs of essence abilities being thrown about. Walls were cracked with impact rings and scorched with the flash-burn signature of fire powers.

All seemed quiet, with no sign of Jason. There were bandits around the town, along with some miserable-looking unfortunates that the bandits were using as slaves. The bandits sat around, playing cards or molesting one of their more attractive slaves. There were men and women amongst the bandits, who cared more about toughness and malevolence over gender. Essences absolved any natural disparity in physical power between the sexes.

There was a corpse pinned to a wall with large stone spikes, that the bandits paid no mind. Unseen in the shadows, Jason watched one of the enslave former residents look longing at the outskirts of the town, then fearfully at the dead body. Even with a head start, there was nowhere to hide in the sparse, flat terrain of the veldt. It was nothing but low grass marked by the occasional lonely tree.

The bandits languid day was disturbed when one came staggering out of a building. It was a poor village and there were no doors on any of the buildings which had the bandit loudly stumbling through a curtain of beads before collapsing on the ground, blood pooling under his head. His fellows rushed over and turned over the body, finding his throat cut.

“Someone killed Craig!”

Paying attention to the body, they didn't notice a pair of blood-red strips of ragged cloth snake out of the doorway the dead bandit had emerged from. Only once they wrapped themselves around the corpse's legs were they spotted, the bandits watching in startlement as the corpse was rapidly dragged back into the building.

“What was that?”

“Go get the boss while I check it out. Someone thinks they can mess with us and they're about to have a very bad day.”

One of the larger bandits flexed his muscles, dark, hard scales covering his body. Others picked up weapon or conjured them out of thin air, some wreathed in fire or sizzling with electric sparks. The one with the scales went inside and the others heard him crashing about.

“Dammit, there's another one dead in here,” he called out, then stormed back out of the room.

“Two of our guys are dead in there and none of you idiots saw or heard a thing. What is wrong with you idiots?”

“Neither did you!”

That earned the speaker a punch to the face.

“I said go get the boss, idiots.”

He pointed out one of the bandits.

“You, go get him. Everyone else search the town. Whoever did this is here somewhere, and roust everyone out while you’re at it.”

Seeing the images recorded from high above, Jason’s team watched as the bandits started turning over the town. They found no sign of their attacker beyond what had been left behind. Many of the buildings had dead bandits, usually from a slice across the throat or a stab wound to the back of the neck. Others looked like corpses left in the desert for weeks, their bodies dried out and rotted, when they had been seen walking around hours or even just minutes earlier.

They dragged the bodies out into the sandy dirt of the main street as they cleared the building one by one.

“Where’s Vargas?”

“I saw him go into that building over there.”

“Did you see him come out?”

The bandits began to realise that more of their number were going missing in the course of the search. They heard screams coming from one of the buildings and then one of their number came staggering out, looking more dead than alive. The big bandit with the scales rushed over and grabbed the man’s shoulders to keep him upright.

“Who was it?”

The man was barely able to cough out a response.

“Shadow... eye...”

They felt an ominous aura come from the building, along with an icy voice.

“Suffer the cost of your transgressions.”

The bandit holding the man up felt flesh soften under his fingers and he dropped the man as they watched his already corpse-like appearance fully rot in front of their eyes. The big man burst into the building, finding it empty.

The bandit’s leader emerged from the largest building in the town, formerly the only tavern before the bandit leader claimed it for himself. He had no shirt and was still pulling up his pants, eyes going wide at the pile of the bodies in the street. The remaining bandits, the better part of two dozen, assembled in front of him.

The leader loudly demanded to know what was going on and a dozen bandits all tried to talk at once, unnerved at finding almost a quarter of their number dead at the hands of unseen enemies.

“SHUT UP!” the leader bellowed and was about to make more demands when he looked behind the bandits assembling in front of him. Following his gaze, they all turned around to see four cloaked figures standing behind them in a line. One was a man in a cloak made of darkness and stars. Another looked to be made of darkness entirely. A third was wrapped head to foot in bloody rags, its hood and cloak made from dangling strips. The final figure was just a cloak with no wearer. All that was inside it was an eye, a little larger than a head, made of what looked like blue and orange fire. Two orbs drifted around the floating cloak, slightly smaller versions of the main eye.

The leader pushed his way forward through his men to stand in front of them. He guessed the man in the cloak was an actual person, the others having the looks of summons or familiars. The only aura he could sense from any of them was a bronze-rank aura from the figure made of bloody rags. Unsurprisingly, the sense he got from the aura was a blood drenched hunger.

“You killed my people?” the leader asked.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“So you would all gather in one place.”

“What for?”

“To kill the rest.”

The leader frowned. “You’re Adventure Society?”

“Yes.”

“They just said to kill us, instead of bringing us in, right?”

“Yes.”

The leader was worried by his inability to sense the man’s aura. If the man was a strong bronze-ranker, his bandit clan might be enough to kill him with numbers. If it was a silver ranker, they were all dead. Needing to know either way, he pressed his aura down on the man.

The aura that emerged to block it left him almost laughing in surprise.

“An iron ranker?” he asked, disbelievingly. “You really thought you could take us all out and you’re an iron ranker?”

“I still think that,” came the cold reply.

“Who do you think you are?”

“Jason Asano.”

Many of the bandits, formerly operating under Cole Silva, turned pale. They had all heard different stories but it was a fact that going after Asano had brought down Cole Silva and scattered his organisation into pieces. It was the very thing that brought many of them out into the veldt.

“Is that suppose to scare me?” The leader asked.

“No,” Jason said. “It’s meant to scare them, while they watch me kill you.”

The bandit sneered. He pressed his aura down on Jason’s but was startled to find he was throwing an egg against a rock. The sneer vanished as his aura was pushed back by a force that felt as inexorable as the dawning sun.

“Kill this fool!” the leader barked, but Jason’s aura flooded out and over the bandits. It clamped down onto each one, grinding their own auras into nothing. They were flooded with feelings of exposure and vulnerability, then something sharp pricked not against their bodies but their very souls. As if encased in a spiritual iron maiden, the bandits felt like any movement would leave them pained and punctured.

The big bandit with the scales mustered his courage and lunged in Jason’s direction, He immediately collapsed to the ground, letting out an alien, whistling shriek until suddenly he stopped. Laying on the ground, he looked like he was still screaming but was issuing no sound. His eyes were wide and watering, drenched in soul-deep fear. His whole body was rigid and trembling, as if caught in a seizure.

The bandit leader looked down at the fallen bandit, then the others. They were frozen in place, skin slick with cold sweat and eyes filled with terror. He turned back to Jason.

“You expect me to surrender?”

Jason turned his head to look at the corpse pinned to the wall, then back at the bandit.

“The contract has no terms of surrender.”

The bandit leader’s expression went hard, fierce eyes locked on Jason.

Jason’s perception power now included magical senses, which allowed him to detect the magic surging under his feet. He dodged aside as a thick stone spike burst from the ground in the spot where he had been standing. The spike then exploded, showering him in stone fragments. An army of short tendrils shot out from Jason’s shadow cloak, intercepting any that were about to strike him, and leaving him completely unharmed.

Ability: [Cloak of Night] (Dark)

- Conjunction (darkness, light, dimension).
- Base cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Conjures a magical cloak that can alter the wearer. Offers limited physical protection. Can generate light, or blend into shadows. Cloak can reduce the weight of the wearer for a low mana-per-second cost, allowing reduced falling speed and water walking. Cannot be given or taken away, although effects can be extended to others in very close proximity.

- Effect (bronze): Cloak reflexively intercepts projectiles. Highly effective against rapid, weaker attacks, but less effective against powerful, singular attacks. Cloak allows gliding for low mana-per-second. Weight reduction no longer costs mana unless affecting additional people.

Jason moved into the midst of the bandits, his movements light and quick, his cloak floating around him. The bandits didn't move, frozen by the sensation of knives against their soul and the memory of what happened to their fellow.

A rack of stag horns grew from the bandit leader's forehead and he barrelled through his own people to get at Jason. One was killed by the spearpoint horns of their leader, while another two were knocked away. They tried scrambling away but then screamed a moment before falling silent, like their fellow before them.

Jason and the leader fought amongst the other bandits like duellists in a statue garden. The leader was stronger and faster but Jason had learned to fight from Rufus Remore. Compared to that, the skills of a failed backwater adventurer were crude and buffoonish. He was all power and no finesse; if it weren't for his bronze-rank reflexes, the fight would have been laughable.

Colin and Gordon remained where they were, not moving to assist. Shade's three bodies, on the other hand, joined Jason and the bandit leader in dancing amongst the other bandits. Jason teleported between Shade's bodies to run rings around the bandit leader, dodging the powerful, but slow attacks. It bought him the space to cast a spell or let him reposition to make attacks of his own, dagger shooting forward in the grip of a shadow arm.

Not many of the bandits actually had aura powers. One of the ones who did had been biding her time and when she found herself behind Jason she pushed back against his aura and lunged at his back with her knife, imbued with electrical energy as she used an

essence power on it. The instant she moved, Jason aura crushed hers like a bug in a fist. She too collapsed to the ground, shrieking like the god of death had grabbed her.

Human essence users typically had a preponderance of special attacks and the bandit leader was no different. Many involved flinging fragments of earth over wide area, which the leader did to try and catch the fast moving Jason, He quickly realised this was pointless, the cloak absorbing the attacks with ease. The leader tried a variety of other approaches, from conjuring and throwing hammers to hurling stone spears. As Jason continued to dance around him, his legs transformed into stag's legs, increasing his agility. Chunks of stone erupted from the ground to encase his arms in battering rams and he sprung about on the stag legs, trying to catch and hammer down Jason.

Catching Jason still remained an elusive prospect. Every time he thought he had landed a blow, it turned out Jason had hidden his true position within his cloak, the blow coming close but hitting nothing.

Jason, in turn, had used a few spells at the beginning that seemed to do nothing, the bandit leader assuming they had failed due to rank disparity. Since then, all Jason could manage were superficial wounds from his dagger, which the leader derisively sneered at. It was hardly surprising that a stealth specialist couldn't truly harm a higher-ranker in open combat.

The bandit paid no mind to the tiny wounds as he struggled to pin Jason down. One good hit was all it would take. It took some time before he realised something was horribly wrong. He had an increasing sense of dread, then spotted the black veins under his skin.

"Poison," he spat, coming to a stop.

"Disease, actually," Jason said, doing likewise. "Not that it matters."

"You think this iron-rank crap is enough to take me down?"

"Yes."

As the bandit lunged, again, Jason once more disappeared into one of Shade's bodies, emerging at a distance from the shadow of one of the buildings. He was already chanting a spell.

"Suffer the cost of your transgressions."

The punishment spell withered the bandit leader's affliction-riddled body with necrosis, his muscle atrophying on the spot. He staggered in place even as Jason cast another spell.

"Feed me your sins."

Ability: [Feast of Absolution] (Sin)

- Spell (recovery, cleanse, holy).
- Base cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Cleanse all curses, diseases, poisons and unholy afflictions from a single target. Additionally cleanse all holy afflictions if the target is an ally. Recover stamina and mana for each affliction cleansed. This ability ignores any effect that prevents cleansing. Cannot target self.

- Effect (bronze): Enemies suffer an instance each of [Penance] and [Legacy of Sin] for each condition cleansed from them.

- [Penance] (affliction, holy, damage-over-time, stacking): Deals ongoing transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, dropping off as damage is dealt.

- [Legacy of Sin] (affliction, holy, stacking): You are considered more damaged for the purposes of execute ability damage scaling. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

The bandit leader's life force became visible, shining from within his body. It was tainted with afflictions, marked in swirls of bruise colours; ugly shades of yellow, purple and red. The taint streamed out of the bandit leader life force and into Jason's outstretched hand. What it left behind was shining light of gold, silver blue, sinking back into the bandit's body with his life force and lighting him up from within, shining through his skin. The transcendent light started rapidly eating away at his already stricken body as the bandit leader started to scream.

Jason cast one more spell, to finish the job.

"Mine is the judgement, and the judgement is death."

More transcendent light appeared, hammering down from above like a deity's wrath. The leader's crippled body was entirely eradicated and Jason turned his attention to the remaining bandits.

"You aren't going to just kill us, right?" one of them asked, voice strained with panic.

Jason looked round the little town, seeing the people the bandits had taken as slaves, watching from hiding. His eyes once again fell on the corpse pinned to the wall.

"How many innocent people have you killed?" Jason asked. "There are adventurers heading north, even as we speak, to bring back the people you sold into slavery. In the face of that, you ask for mercy? If I took you back to the city, they would just kill you there."

Horror filled their faces as they realised they were about to die. The bandits started scattering, in spite of the fear Jason's aura suppression was still inflicting. The results were the same as those who had gone before as they all immediately collapsed, screaming with a pain unlike anything they had ever known before going silent, like the others.

Jason looked over them writhing on the ground and took a shuddering breath. He had killed before, quite a lot now. This would be his first execution. He was troubled by how little that prospect troubled him.

"Colin," he said flatly. "Feed."

Still standing by, Colin suddenly exploded like a bomb had hit him, raining leeches down onto the bandits. Caught up in Jason's soul attack, none of them screamed until Colin's afflictions claimed their lives.

Jason stood in the middle of the dead bandits, held his arms out to his side and chanted a spell.

"As your lives were mine to reap, your deaths are mine to harvest."

Ability: [Blood Harvest] (Blood)

- Spell (drain).
- Base cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Drain the remnant life force of a recently deceased body, replenishing health, stamina and mana. Only affects targets with blood.

- Effect (bronze): Affects any number of bodies in a wide area.

Using their remote viewing crystal, the team watched as blood red life force streamed out of the bodies and into Jason. From above, he looked like a spider at the centre of a bloody web.

"Now, I'm not looking to give no offence," their guide said, "but your man there seems worse than the folk he was sent after."

"An opinion you'll keep to yourself," Humphrey said sharply, although his eyes didn't waver from the projection. "If I hear you say that where he can hear it, you'll be answering to me."

"Oh, don't worry on that account," the man said. "He's going to find everyone real polite."